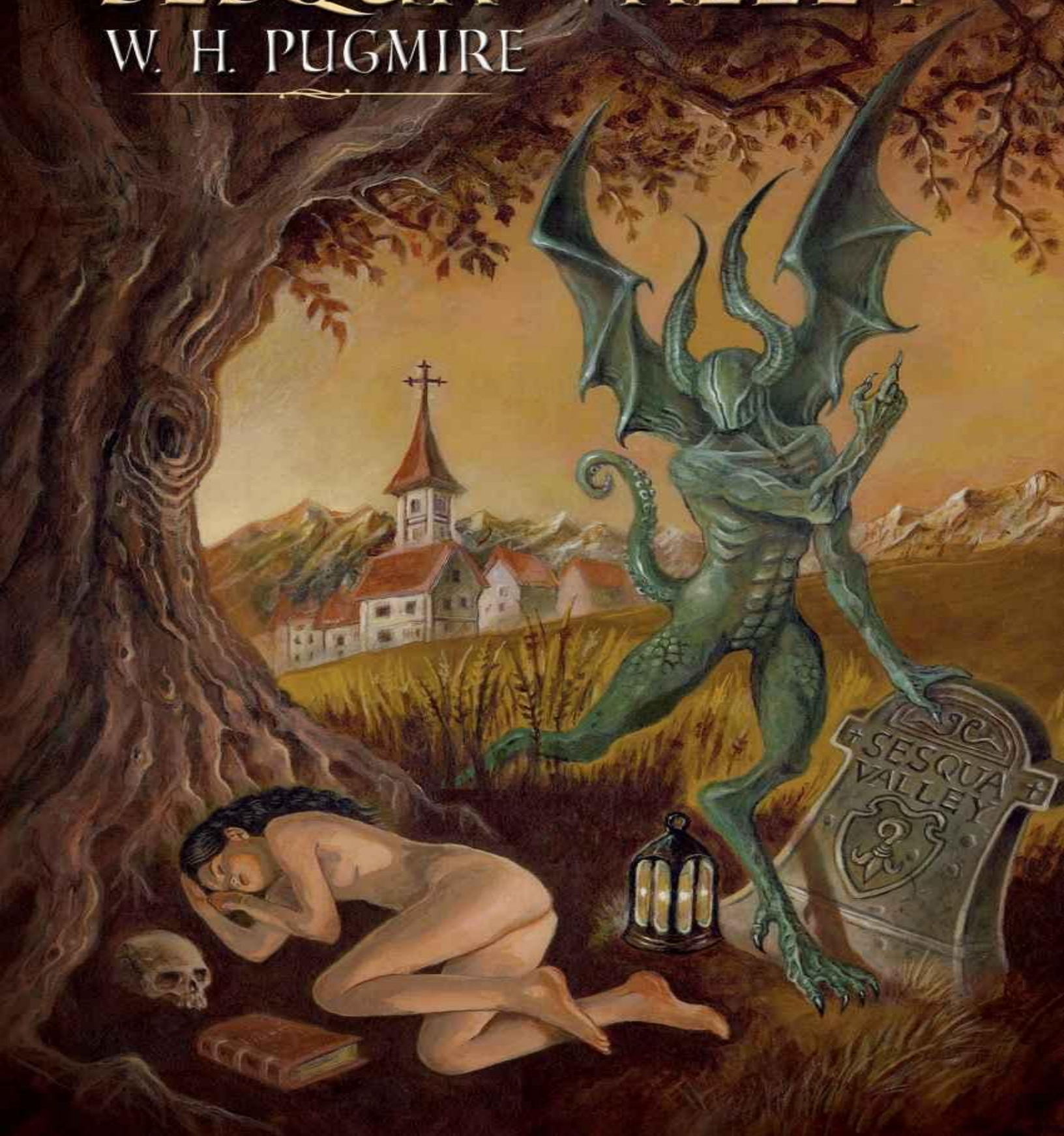


BOHEMIANS OF SESQUA VALLEY

W. H. PUGMIRE



Bohemians of Sesqua Valley

W. H. Pugmire

First eBook Edition

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Arcane Wisdom

P. O. Box 130

Welches, OR 97067

www.miskatonicbooksblog.com

www.miskatonicbooks.com

arcanewisdom@me.com

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Dedicated to Niels S Hobbs, Esq.

&

NecronomiCon Providence 2013

Introduction

Jessica Amanda Salmonson

There are really only two living authors I believe took a lot of what they learned from H. P. Lovecraft and Edgar Allan Poe, then made those lessons into something strictly their own—emotive, decadent, lonesome dark jewels. One is W. H. Pugmire, the other is Tom Ligotti.

In both cases, having read their stuff before they were published anywhere but the amateur press, I felt they were probably too original for popular success. The public likes crap, and preferably particolored unoriginal crap. And here were depths of darkness and sorrow and disturbing moments of humor and grotesquerie that seemed to have seeped from bleakly loving souls, broken rather than twisted, broken by an ugly world perhaps, manifesting in our material world like diamonds of jet.

To my surprised delight both men were found by devoted followings, each achieving a comprehending audience. It restores somewhat my faith in humanity that the truly strange, the truly beautiful, and the completely individual can be met with delight by a visible number of deeply dreaming readers.

In Wilum's case I am additionally privileged to call him brother, of the kindred soul kind, having known him since our wondrously ill spent days of youth. I dare say I survived the 'seventies because of his friendship and concern, whether he knows it or not, and I suspect he knows since I lingered at times on the precipice of a suicidal depression, from which he refused to let me fall.

Once when I was staggeringly unable to cope with the next minute of existence, a knock came to the door, and when I opened it, there stood a traditional party clown with huge red lips and clad in motley.

Now “normal” clowns are frankly creepy, but the delightful thing about Wilum doing the bright and cheerful type is that his usual character was the vampire Count Pugsly, promotor of Jones Fantastic Museum. Caped, fanged, and green of complexion, he made the sinister a joyful terror. He made darkness gleam by his character performance, with the same seeming ease by which he does it with his fiction.

I’d never seen him do his Regular Clown before, but I knew the figure’s history, in that this very Clown had formerly arrived at a hospital to cheer up a terminally ill friend. And who is to say my own exhausting depression wasn’t about to be terminal for me.

At sight of this apparition of alleged happiness I was supremely startled. My knees weakened and I fell on the floor, at the same time laughing hysterically. Here was the Good Clown, the Clown of Light, who had formerly brought joy to the dying, and had risen anew to restore life to the emotionally dead.

That’s just an impressionistic view of a complex moment in a complicated year. I don’t understand, even now, how Wilum could devote so much of his love and energy to seeing me through it. Depressed people are so wearying, worrying, ultimately even stupid and selfish, and I must have had long patches of being impossible to bear.

I tell you this in part in case you thought these tales of terror, or shock, even of grue, lack a humane impulse. Those of us who have dwelt with darkness do not just laugh at the haunted, the humiliated, the maimed. We see into our own injured places, and find hope in tales that on the surface are against hope.

Overt tales of hope are always lies; we must look at our own terror more honestly than that. We’re all doomed; our shared fate is to be extinguished. And to have this single universal fact of our existence illuminated really does bring light where otherwise there might be none.

There’s a fundamental mystic tenet, that darkness is light unmanifest. Such visionlessness is even a comfort, shading us from a truth so bright that we would be blasted as in fire to gaze at it directly without intervening shadow. For me, and I like to believe also for many others, Wilum’s tales are not just clever gloomy poetic scraps of entertainment to be gleaned along the readers’ path, but authentic portraits of the eccentric, the spiritual,

the alienated and alone, such as dwells in most of us to greater or lesser degree.

When first I undertook to write this little introduction I tried not to despair of the fact that I really cannot convey what both Wilum, and his storytelling, has meant to me along the years. But I find myself certain that merely hinting at it will be sufficient, as these tales mean just that much to a sizeable percentage of the readers who come to them not to scoff at the fictionally doomed, but to share that doom via mysterious pools of fantasy, as prelude and etude to the final bargain that awaits us all.

In Memoriam: Robert Nelson

W. H. Pugmire

Under the unmoving cloud, I wait. Still, I taste the nectar of that lake of blood, wherein I washed my innocent hands, and then my face, with gore that spilt from hands that knew no crime as yet. I take up one perfumed blossom from the lake of blood, a bloom wherein is curled a fetid serpent that, rising, kisses my eye. White mist of moon sinks down to copulate with crimson mist of lake, and I rise at last, barefoot, a phantom lost in mournful youth. I creep beneath unmoving cloud, into the woodland of neglected souls, and shake from my splintered skull my crumbled dreams. I drift on naked foot through rotting gloom, beyond joy and sorrow, into a realm of ecstasy and pain. I find the vacant tomb beside the vat of gore, that tub before which kneels a clumsy skeleton that has dropped its skull into the silo's mess. I push my hand into the thick liquid debris and pluck the skull, but turn my eyes away from its too-wide grin. I walk, barefoot, upon the soft floor of that mephitic woodland, sucking in its fumes, until my calloused toes touch mausoleum marble. How sad the crimson candles look, unlit. I set the skull onto a ledge and place one candle in its jaw. Striking flint, I summon sparks that kiss my eye, that lick the several candle wicks. The tiny scarlet flames are beads of blood on fire. They shimmer as did the lake of blood, and I clutch with innocent hands into the air of carnage. One candle alone remains unlit, reposing in a death's-head jaw. I strike the flint a second time and wonder why this candle's flame is black. I feel that glacial flame upon my eye, that eye that peers onto the sharp edge of the flint stones, that hard unyielding edge. I strike that edge against my pulsing wrist and watch the mist of mortality rise from me and conjoin with crimson air. I move my naked foot in pool of blood and peer at that one midnight flame that ushers me, at last, into glad deliverance.

One Card Unturned

with Maryanne K. Snyder

I

Stanley Kaplan pulled into the rest stop, switched off the car and stretched. Having driven for hours, his back was stiff and his stomach growling. Sighing, he vacated the vehicle, used the men's room, purchased some deli food and returned to the car, frowning as he opened the lid to what was supposed to be a carton of potato salad. Setting aside the food, he picked up the notebook that rested beside him and began to thumb through its pages, finding again the three crudely drawn maps that supposedly led to the valley that was his destination, a place not shown on any regular map of Washington State. Shutting his aching eyes, Stanley soug the memory of recent dreams, visions in which he saw himself driving to Sesqua Valley, the region that summoned.

He thought again of the curious nature of Kathleen Steelwood's enigmatic notebook. Mostly, it dealt with a mysterious Tarot deck, called by Kathleen "the Yellow Deck" or "the Sesqua Tarot". Some of her journal conveyed aspects of the mysterious and sequestered valley, but in a manner that seemed intriguingly distant. Stanley couldn't ascertain if the woman had actually entered the valley herself. Portions of her entries came to sudden endings, as if the woman were about to reveal some secret but then had second thoughts. What seemed obvious to Stanley was Kathleen's obsession with the Yellow Deck, with its occult history. He began to read in Kathleen's journal.

files of Katherine Steelwood.

Sessquaw Tarot aka 'The Yellow Deck'

April 30, 1942

informant: Marta Tzaddic

Sacramento, California

verbatim except re:deck from shorthand: see stenobooks

“There is a deck you must not see and an evil people you must never befriend. The Rom do not say its name, the Black Gypsies will brick dust after you if you inquire. Some call it the Yellow Deck, I do not know why; the back is red with eyes of black. Those that read it have silver eyes. I do not mean grey eyes in the usual way, I mean such silver as that of coins which shines under the Sun’s blessed light—but the Sun does not make these people’s eyes shine nor the Moon—only the pain of men.

“I tell you this because you are my friend. Heed the warning of your friend.”

May 15, 1943

notes: cross-reference with file, “King In Yellow Tarot”

Marta’s deck description does not match the back patterns of record for the King in Yellow Tarot (1928). Her characterization of the Yellow Deck as an evil deck is consistent with the reputation of the KiYT, but there is no record of the KiYT being in the hands of any readers other than Madame Sosatris nor any mention of “silver eyes”. I could have taken “silver eyes” as a poetic expression of the fact that the KiYT limited print run of 1928 went only to the wealthiest collectors and clients of Madame S. but that Marta was very explicit in her description of it being her first-hand observation of an individual as opposed to repeating a tale or tradition.

notes: cross-reference with file, “de Laurence decks”

Marta is very familiar with all of the de Laurence decks available, including the “yellow edition”, so it is unlikely that she is referring to that deck.

November 2, 1943

It occurred to me that “Yellow deck” may also refer to the nature of the deck as obscene and the printer as a printer of sexually explicit books or “spicy” playing cards. Universities do not keep bibliographies of such presses. I found that even legal records such as court dockets, transcripts, and even newspaper stories of prosecutions of the makers of “legally obscene” materials routinely fail to mention the presses or the works by name (!) in order to deny them publicity. I did attempt to find and interview collectors of such works; cross reference with “Erotic Card Collectors” list. Details of my lack of success in finding this Tarot will be found in that list.

“art study” decks would be an interesting line of folkloric research but better handled by a male researcher. Too many doors closed to a woman.

August 1, 1944

I have stopped asking about the Yellow deck or individuals with silver eyes, as it most emphatically terminates every interview with both the Rom and the Negro readers. Even a Red Indian (Duwamish) woman refused to speak to me further after I had described the back pattern.

Marta was also correct about brick dust and the Negro fortune-tellers.

Cross ref: “Charms and Gestures Against the Evil Eye” file.

I don’t know what upsets people more: the deck itself, or the people with the silver eyes.

February 2, 1945

informant: Maria Tzaddic

Sacramento, California

verbatim except re: deck from shorthand: see stenobooks

“I have heard that you are asking unwise questions. Promise me that you will ask no questions of others, and I will tell you all I know of ‘The Yellow Deck.’

I agreed. Marta seemed relieved on my behalf, but became more emotional as she related the following:

“It was when I was young and beautiful myself. I had many clients, even the Mayor’s wife and the wife of the Chief of Police, and we had settled well and were healthy and happy. This was after the Great War, the georgios were making money, all of our children were fat in those days...I had lovely clothes and good manners, the ladies of society came to me.

“Then the woman with silver eyes came [spits on her thumb at this point] and all my ladies went to her. I met one on the street outside of her parlor, my lady cast her eyes down in shame, for who had been the first to warn her about her husband and give her a charm? None but I...the faithless one, she told me that my rival was more gifted than I, I should try her and see, I would myself agree in the end. Though, as she said this, perhaps I saw a tear fall to the pavement from her eye.

“Under a false name I entered and crossed my rival’s palm with silver. It was well that I had not taken time to curse the coin, for then it truly would have gone ill with me for such effrontery.

“She looked at me and smiled, the smile of a sow that has eaten her own litter, that one. She set aside the cards on her table. ‘I knew you would come. You, you deserve a different deck, a most special deck.’ and she opened a wooden box and unwrapped the Yellow Deck. I saw the backs of the cards their wicked eyes unblinking at me. I crossed myself. My mothers had told me of this deck, ‘No thank you, ma’am.’ I said, ‘I don’t want special treatment, I can’t afford to pay you more,’ and she laughed.

“‘You were right to say no to me. I know who you are and I know you have come upon harder times recently. It will go harder still if you stay. Leave me these fat pigs, I’ll walk them to their fates gracefully, with art. You would be too kind.’

“‘I can’t promise you that we will leave, that is for all of us to decide,’ though in truth, all the men would have taken my counsel without question, but I was only a young woman and my mothers would have been angry if I had bound us with a promise out of my place.

“So I took very polite leave of her, shaking my shoes.

“We did not depart. My mothers did not want to leave so fat a place. If the society ladies had left us, that was poor fortune, but their husbands and sons still came to our men to dice and play at cards and to buy remedies and charms. Perhaps the Silver Eyed One would get bored and leave, or be driven out, who knows?

“Then the men and children and horses got ill. They fevered and shook in their beds, they were marked with strange markings of spots and stripes and letters we did not know. The mothers sent me back to her with our finest white horse to say we were leaving and beg her mercy.

“She took the horse and said to me, ‘I am in a generous mood today. Today is your day of good fortune. I will make a pact between yours and mine, mine of Sessquaw Valley, you will know us by our eyes, from now until the falling of the stars: when one of mine enters a town on one side, you and yours will leave by the other without hesitation or pause. Swear to this and your men and your children and your horses will be well.’

“‘I am most expansive. I will tell you something else, my sister in the Art. These cards, had you seen them all, you would have died. The eyes of your spirit would have been opened far beyond your capacity to understand and you would have gone mad, then, weak, then fallen dead in a world you could not recognize without its falsehoods intact.’

“We packed our wagons and left within the hour. On the road before our eyes the markings faded, the fevers broke, we cried and hugged our babies but did not stop for a moment our travel away, not for at least seven nights, and we have never gone so far North again.

“That is my story. It is all I know of those people and those cards. It is all I need to know. My oath has bound me and mine; you are not of us so it does not bind you and it does not protect you. Do you understand? I cannot protect you.”

My question: “If it is dangerous to see all the cards, how is it this woman could read them?”

Marta gave me a pitying look. “Surely you have come across decks of cards missing the Ace of Spades?”

Indeed I have and Marta knew it. She was referring to the custom of the wholly commercial fortune-tellers to remove the Ace of Spaces (the Death card) from their decks so that the card would not come up in a reading and frighten customers; Marta herself was above such chicanery. Marta’s implication was that the student of such a dangerous deck could remove one card and set it aside never to be seen, thus preserving her life at the expense of the accuracy of her readings.

June 22, 1947

informant: Marta Tzaddic

Sacramento, California

(verbatim except re: deck from shorthand: see stenobooks)

notes: Marta looked older than her age would suggest. The Rom have lost many in the war.

“We will continue as a people, God will see to that and I trust God. I must tell you, do not become complacent, I have never again seen a man or a woman with silver eyes but I know they are not gone. Their numbers have not been diminished by war nor tyrants. Their numbers grow slowly. They travel widely, every one of them. You must not seek them. I know, you have not been asking unwise questions, that is good, but your heart still burns with curiosity. It is who you are. Let not curiosity kill the cat! [a nice pun on my name]

“I cannot lose another one I love. Promise me you will stop your search of books and maps. Promise me that you will never seekout those cards or those people.”

September 5, 1947

re: Marta Tzaddic (1901-1947)

personal note: I had a dream in which Marta burned a box of cards in front of me. There is only one deck I can think of that she would burn. The smoke had a horrible stench that woke me up. I've never dreamed a smell before. I didn't know one could. I don't think I'll ever forget it.

Stanley set aside the journal and switched on the motor. As he pulled out of the rest stop, he felt a peculiar sense of excitement. Yes, the study of rare Tarot decks was his profession—but it was also his passion. He sensed that he was on the trail of something very rare and wonderful. Images from the woman's journal formed in his imagination, and he drove in a state of semi-dream until, suddenly, his vehicle moved into a lush vale. There, in the soft glow of late-afternoon sunlight, Stanley beheld the twin peaks of a titanic white mountain. The highway led downward. He had entered Sesqua Valley.

II

He entered into a town of buildings that looked like something from the country's past. Oddly, Stanley could not now remember where he was or why he was there. He parked the car and then sat for a little while rubbing his forehead, as if by doing so he could loosen memory. His hand fell to his side and touched the opened notebook. He looked at the crude hand-drawn map and at the name of the place it indicated. "Sesqua Valley." Stanley spoke the name aloud, and a chill caressed his flesh. Shuddering, he glanced out the window at the old town. "Sesqua Valley" he spoke more loudly, and as the words fell from his lips his mind began to clear. Taking up the notebook, he opened the car door and stepped onto the ground, breathing deeply of the scented air. Someone must be burning something that smelled sweet and cloying. He walked to the wooden sidewalk and casually looked into the windows that he passed. Some few citizens that he encountered smiled at him blandly, except for one fellow whose face was unfortunately malformed, from birth defect he surmised. This unlucky chap

peered at him with eyes that were pale and of an alabaster hue. Why did the idea of such eyes cause Stanley's flesh to chill and prickle?

The planks of sidewalk came to an end, and so he hopped onto the road so as to continue his investigation of the town. Finally, he came to a large mansion of ancient design, in the window of which was a faded sign that read "Antiques." Stanley walked up the few steps that led to the front door and entered in. Charmed, he ambled past the items that crowded the mammoth room, stopping now and then to reach out and gently touch the past. Had he been a person of wealth, he would have lived in rooms filled with such furnishings, in a house as ancient as the building in which he now found himself. It was a lovely fantasy, to dwell in a home that glowed with mellow lamplight, a residence that was cozy and quiet, filled with only the absolute necessities of modernity.

And then Stanley's heart began to beat wildly, as he chanced upon a display of Tarot decks. He was familiar with all of the decks, but had actually seen none of them. They were very rare, and he felt slightly guilty as he gently handled a few of the cards, holding them by their sides, not wanting to smear fingerprints onto the wonderful images with which the cards had been decorated. He then sensed a presence at his side. The figure nodded to him, saying nothing. Stanley took in the weird pale face, the dark twinkling eyes and shock of wild white hair. He waited for the other to speak, and at last, impatiently, he muttered, "I was looking for the Sesqua deck. It doesn't seem to be here."

How queerly the ancient creature's dark eyes glimmered. "Ah, that is not a thing we openly display, it being one of a kind. How do you know of it?"

Stanley turned at the sound of the door opening and watched the weird gentleman creep into the room. He nodded as the fellow bowed to him, an odd smile playing on the man's peculiarly shaped mouth. Turning back to the proprietor, Stanley opened Kathleen's notebook and allowed the old one to scan a page, then let go as the elderly fellow took the notebook from Stanley's grasp and carefully turned its leaves.

"Look here, Simon, at this charming hand-drawn map of the valley. Rather quaint, isn't it?"

The other gentleman silently joined them and chuckled as he scrutinized the diagram in the notebook. Then he offered a large hand to

Stanley. "Simon Gregory Williams, and this is Leonidas Creighton."

Stanley introduced himself.

"But this is fascinating. The yellowed paper bespeaks of age, but I can find no date." Simon continued to examine the notebook as he spoke, and then he smiled at Stanley inquiringly.

"I believe the woman who wrote it compiled this information in the early 1950's. She doesn't seem to have actually visited your valley, judging from what she has written. You can see that the various maps are in pencil and that the lettering is markedly different from the journal's text."

"And what is your interest in the so-called Sesqua deck, Mr. Kaplan?" asked Leonidas.

"Purely professional, I assure you." He explained his occupation, becoming so caught up in the love and excitement his work brought to him that he did not notice the troubled expressions exchanged by his listeners as he described his desire to copy the cards and reproduce them as commercial product.

It was Simon who finally spoke up. "Of course, the cards are not for sale. We have a passion for collecting all aspects of representation of Sesqua Valley. Our sense of place and pride is curiously keen. However, we can loan you the deck, for a limited time, and allow you to copy it for the purpose of reproduction. I think, Leonidas, we may want to procure this charming notebook for our archives. Is it for sale, sir?"

Simon's face was very close to Stanley's, and as the outsider gazed into the calm silver eyes he thought he could detect an odd suggestion of peculiar colors that swam as translucent light upon the surface of those outré eyes. Stanley breathed in the fragrance that exuded from the Sesquan's skin, the sweet and seductive scent of Sesqua Valley. He glanced at the notebook in Simon's grasp. It had served its purpose and brought the Yellow Deck to him, if but temporarily.

"I have no future use of it," Stanley informed them, smiling. "Let me donate the notebook to your archives, in thanks for your cooperation in allowing me access to the Sesqua deck. I'll be right back. I need to go to my car and get the protective sleeves into which I'll slip the cards. Every aspect of care and protection will be given them."

"Excellent," Simon replied as he continued to examine the pages of the notebook as Stanley hurried to his car.

Leonidas snarled a guttural sigh. “I need to join Cyrus at the second shop. This is an intrusion. What are your plans?”

“Plan? We need do nothing. The Yellow Deck will accomplish what is required. Oh, his tremulous eyes! He is enthralled by the very idea of looking at the cards. We shall leave him alone, give him all the time he needs. You will offer him an evening room at no cost. The valley will work its wonder over him, the lure with which she has already snagged him. No, Leonidas—we need do nothing.”

The outsider returned with a thick briefcase in his hand and excitement dancing in his eyes. Leonidas smiled at him and motioned that Stanley should follow him, and then led him to an alcove that was dimly lit. The elder creature’s pallid hands reached for a teakwood box, which he placed onto a stand. “I’ll leave you to your business, Mr. Kaplan; but do remember that this deck is old and very rare.”

“Absolutely. I have a special camera with which I’ll photograph each card, and I’m quite adept at making copies of cardstock with pen and ink, to capture intricacies that won’t be captured on film. It’s time consuming...”

“The upper portion of this building serves as a bed-and-breakfast establishment, and I’ll happily supply you with a room at no cost, for as long as you need to work. Would that be easier than taking the cards with you to the city? You could combine work with a holiday of sorts. You’ll find the valley restful, for a few days at least.”

“That would be fantastic! I was going to try and find a motel or something, but if I could stay here, it would make everything so much easier. But I can pay you.”

“Not at all. Mrs. Rudson will charge you for meals, that is all. Her cooking is superb. Shall I show you a room? Can you contain your obvious curiosity concerning the cards?”

And so Stanley followed the old one to the upper portion of the ancient building, to a room that was simply furnished. Although he wouldn’t be taking the cards out of Sesqua Valley as was his original hope, he wanted still to encase them in protective sleeves. When, at last, he was alone, he sat on the bed and donned curator’s gloves, then reached for the teakwood box, which he carefully opened. Reaching into it, he took out the bundle of cards that had been wrapped in a piece of black silk, using the silk to bear the weight of the deck evenly in his hands. The clean scent of cedar assailed his

nostrils as he drew apart the fabric's folds, which revealed the reddish edge-worn leaves of the cards.

From some distant place in the valley, a beast wailed. One by one, he placed all of the cards onto the bed, wondering at the texture of the stock on which they had been printed, which felt queer to the touch. All of the cards were before him, and yet he could not quite make out their design because his eyesight became blurred as a sensation of deep-rooted pounding emerged from some place beneath the mansion. Removing a handkerchief, he wiped his eyes and then dabbed at the moisture on his forehead. Was he coming down with some sudden disease?

Taking up a pen and blank notebook, Stanley began to try and copy one of the cards, and as he peered at the card its image became absolutely clear. He gasped at the intricacy of the design. To reproduce such designs was a portion of work at which he was quite skilled, and he adored exploring every aspect of the card that he was replicating. He worked until his eyes grew heavy, and when at last he set down his head and shut his eyes, visions of the Yellow Deck drifted in his dreaming.

III

For two days Stanley Kaplan kept to his room, working as in a fever on his reproduction of the Yellow Deck. He made three sets of photographic reproductions with his highly-technical camera, but now he was doing what he loved best, filling a notebook with an artistic representation of each card in his own hand. On this third day he felt the need for air and scenery, and so he placed his notebook, pens and the deck into a hefty knapsack and walked into the morning air. Used as he was to the dim light of his room, the light of Sesqua Valley was bright upon his eyes. Oddly, when he shut those eyes so as to rub his hand over them, images from the Yellow Deck floated before him as sentient symbols, emblems that danced provocatively. He could almost taste the scent that faintly exuded from the cards, the smell that daintily mingled with the valley's cloying fragrance.

He opened his eyes and looked at the nearby mountain, that twin-peaked titan of sparkling white stone. Its image had been used on the Magician card, whereon the artist had imbued the mass of stone with a weird kind of—consciousness—that was the only word that came to mind. And as he kept his eyes on the mountain, Stanley had the strangest sense that it was observing him. He had certainly been spending too much time cooped up in that room. His mind was undoubtedly playing tricks apropos of the Magician. He moved on, cheered by the droll connection, down the wooden sidewalk of Sesqua Town's quaint business area. Entering a small café, he sat and ordered coffee and scones. From his knapsack he took out his notebook and the Fool card, on which he was working.

"Wow, is that the Yellow Deck?"

Stanley looked up at the young man who wore an astonished expression on his strange face. "It is."

"Damn! How the hell did you get it out of Creighton's clutches?"

"I'm merely examining it while I am staying in town. I work for an outfit that reproduces rare Tarot decks. This is quite a find."

"It is," the lad responded as he sat, uninvited, across from the outsider. The elder man noticed the boy's silver eyes and facial features resembled Simon's, although they were not nearly as grotesque.

"Have you an interest in Tarot?"

"Not really. I'm an artist, and I saw your notebook and had a hunch that you drew. You're drawing the deck?"

"A pictorial reproduction, yes."

The young man studied Stanley's reproduction of the card. "Not very flattering, to give the Fool your face."

Wrinkling his face in confusion, Stanley glanced at the page of his notebook and was astonished to find that his rendition did indeed resemble himself. "How curious. It was not deliberate." He looked up at the boy and laughed uneasily.

"But it's true to the card, really. You see, the figure there resembles you as well. You were just being accurate. Kind of amusing that you didn't notice the resemblance." And he laughed as well, lightly. "So, you've examined all of the cards?"

"Oh yes, many times. I'm puzzled that there is nothing that names the artist. It must have been some local person, I should think."

The boy was silent for some few moments, and then he smiled broadly. “Say, if you’re not doing anything later this evening, some few of us local artists are meeting here for a little social thing. They’d be fascinated with your project, and may even have some clues about the origin of the Yellow Deck. How long will you be in Sesqua?”

“For a few days more, I think. It’s quite relaxing. Yes, I’d enjoy meeting local art folk. At what time?”

“When darkness falls.” Then the boy rose, winked at Stanley and was gone.

Finishing his coffee, Stanley packed his things and returned outdoors. As a child he had loved following trails through woods, and so he decided to enter the woodland and see where any path would lead him. He walked a ways, until coming to a place where stood a mammoth boulder taller than him, and a tree next to it whose bark was of a dark purple hue. He touched a hand to the chilly bark and the places where small protuberances pushed outward, shapes that resembled some kind of runic alphabet. Oddly, the symbols were not of artificial substance; rather, they were a natural part of the tree’s trunk, part of the living thing. He was, of course, familiar with the ancient Germanic alphabet, and with traditions of carving such symbols on rock and wands of wood; but this was something different and inexplicable.

Stanley kept his hand on the tree as shadows around him darkened. Beneath his feet he sensed a kind of rhythmic beating, as if he stood upon the place of a behemoth’s neck where pulsed a monstrous vein. A faint mauve mist began to gather at the place where his hand still pressed against the tree, a mist that coiled around his hand. Seized by sudden panic, Stanley pushed away from the thing and fled the place. His sense of direction became confused and he knew not where he was rushing to, in what direction he was headed. The silence of the woods seemed unnatural, a hush that accentuated his frantic painting.

At last he came to a clearing, but it was not the place he hoped it would be. Before him was a small lake, and on the other side of the water was a sight that seemed familiar. He gazed at the two-story cabin of yellow wood, at the three totems that slanted before it. And then it came to him. Reaching into his knapsack, he took out his notebook and rifled through its leaves until he came to his depiction of the Yellow Deck’s rendition of the

Three of Wands. Yes, the card depicted this very scene, the cabin and the queer totems.

Stanley watched as the water of the lake began to ripple. Something white and shapeless subtly emerged in the middle of the body of water. Stanley intuited that what he was watching was but the smallest portion of a monstrous thing. The sun must have been affecting his sight, for he imagined that he could make out multiple eyes forming and vanishing on the protoplasmic surface. Then another form surfaced next to it, something lean and black that swam toward the totems and crawled out of the water. Was it a malformed wolf? He watched as the beast approached one of the totems and then expanded with shape-shifting. The paw that had stretched so as to touch the totem became an ebony human hand. At last she stood, proud and erect, a beauteous black woman with long red hair, superbly nude. She stalked toward the cabin and entered into it. Gradually, the soft sound of singing caught his attention and beguiled him. Stanley walked around the lake and toward the cabin, stopping so as to be able to peer through the doorway. He saw that the woman had quickly dressed and was sitting at what looked to be an antique spinning wheel.

“You may enter if you wish.”

Like one caught in a spell of enchantment, Stanley moved to the doorway and crossed its threshold, creeping into a cluttered room. “I’m sorry to intrude, miss. I seem to have lost my way.”

She turned her beauteous face to his but did not smile. He took in the luster of her amber eyes. “You’re not in town for Old Twelfth?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Twelfth Night?”

“Um...”

“The time when that that is is not. No?”

“I’m sorry, no. I’m here on a project concerning the Yellow Deck.” Was it his imagination, or did her eyes darken? “I work for a company that replicates rare Tarot decks.”

She smiled at last, the sight of which disconcerted him, and rose from her spinning wheel. “Aha. I doubt you’ll be allowed to see it.”

“I have it with me, on loan.” He reached into his pack and took out the deck wrapped in its silken cloth. “Mr. Creighton has allowed me to borrow it so that I can make my copy. I’ve already photographed each card, and

now I'm in the process of drawing pen and ink replications. Naturally, I was fascinated to find your habitat here beside the lake. It corresponds with the Three of Wands."

"Have you given yourself a reading?"

"Not yet. I've been too fascinated studying and copying the cards. They cast quite an enchantment!"

The woman took the deck from him, unwrapped the silk cloth and dropped it to the floor, on which she sat, motioning for Stanley to do likewise. Frowning, she looked at the deck of cards, which were face down. Stanley studied the design on the back of the topmost card, a pattern that vaguely unsettled him. He watched the woman shuffle the cards, then take one and set it away from them.

"Why did you do that? I've never seen that before."

"One card unturned," the woman solemnly replied.

"Ah yes—the notebook mentioned something about that. One isn't supposed to look at all of the cards. To do so spells doom."

"Just so. And what is this notebook?"

"It's a record of one woman's investigation of the Sesqua deck. I don't think she actually studied it, although I think she meant to. She misspells the valley's name in her notes, but it is spelled correctly on the three maps that accompany her account."

"That is how you found us."

"It is. The maps all seem the work of different hands, so I think Miss Steelwood meant to visit this region. It was long ago, and I couldn't find any record of her coming here. The record ends rather abruptly."

"You have her notebook with you."

"I've donated it to the Sesqua collection at the antique shop."

The woman shut her eyes and there was a long moment of silence. "That was generous of you. But then, it was the Yellow Deck with which you were intrigued."

"Obsessed. In all my professional life, I've never come across anything like it."

"Yes, it is unique. Touch the deck..." She paused and gazed at him inquiringly.

"Stanley Kaplan."

“Touch the Yellow Deck, Stanley Kaplan.” How carefully she enunciated his name. “Have you looked at the entire deck?”

“Yes, of course. The first thing I did was to spread all of the cards on the bed and study the entire set. To feel its ambiance. To soak it in.”

She peered at him for some moments. “So that is what I discern there, in your eyes.” She then reached for the card that had been set aside and returned it to the deck, which she then wrapped within its black cloth.

“What are you doing?”

“I don’t need to read the cards to know your fate. You are doomed. Come, I’ll show you the way to town. I need to venture there myself.”

She rose from the floor and vacated the cabin without waiting for him to follow her. Dropping the deck into his sack, he got to his feet and rushed after her. The woman kept her silence as she led the way along a woodland path. Stanley followed her in silence until they came upon a magnificent thing, a round tower of red brick that drew his complete attention. Stanley whistled and went to investigate the arched opening of the edifice, touching his hand to some of the symbols that had been embossed upon some of the bricks. They were similar to those he had seen on the bark of the queer purple tree.

A shadow filtered down the portion of a winding step way that he could see within the tower. Stanley backed away to where the woman stood as Simon Gregory Williams emerged from the arched entrance.

“What do you want, Marceline?” He turned his silver eyes to Stanley. “What are you doing with this hag?”

“I lost my way within the woods. She has been kind enough to escort me back to town.”

“Ah. And how goes your work with the Yellow Deck, sirrah?” He glanced at Stanley for the briefest moment, and then turned his outré eyes back to the weird woman, who returned a challenging stare.

“It’s going very well, thank you. I’ve made three photographic sets of all of the cards, and I am nearly finished with my own pen and ink replication of the deck. It’s fascinating work.”

Simon finally returned his gaze to the outsider, and his hideous mouth curled in what was supposed to be an encouraging smile. “Excellent indeed. And the deck is complete? I know so little about Tarot. All of the cards are there?”

“Oh yes, each and every one.”

“Wonderful. But this path is a bit out of the way, if you’re returning to town. Whatever brings you here?”

“This edifice figures in the Yellow Deck’s Tower Card. I knew it would interest this fellow to see it.”

“Is this where you live, Mr. Williams?”

“No—no, it merely houses a portion of my occult library. Nothing that would interest you, I’m certain.”

Stanley raised his shoulders. “Probably not. I’m not interested in mysticism or any of that. I have an aesthetic interest in Tarot decks—a professional interest.”

“Just so.”

“I did almost have a reading from the Yellow Deck, from Miss...”

“Miss Dubois,” the lady responded.

“Indeed?”

“But she didn’t after all, feeling there was no need. It appears that I am doomed—I have looked at the entire deck, and to do so seals one’s fate. So I shall have to be festive and foolhardy, since tomorrow I die.” Stanley chuckled, half-heartedly.

“We can aid you with festivities, with tomorrow’s gala.”

“Hmm? Oh, Old Twelfth. Yes, that will be interesting. I am always interested in food and drink and merriment.”

“I shall see you then.” Simon bowed and then stretched his hand to the woodland path. The woman, linking her arm with Stanley’s, led them away.

IV

Darkness curtained the valley and crept into the corners of Stanley’s eyes as he studied, in golden candlelight, his replication of the Yellow Deck. He had suddenly found electric light too brilliant, its glare too piercing on his eyes; and so he had purchased the candles, and their soft living light filled him with a peace of mind and a calming of the soul. This gave him pause. What was there, within his soul, that needed tranquility?

New senses seemed to have infiltrated him, weird and uncanny and troubling. He experienced this most when in the company of the locals who owned silver eyes and queer faces. Their eyes gazed at him in ways he had never been studied before, and their faces seemed to conceal secrets that might prove dangerous to comprehend.

He was thirsty, and so he extinguished candlelight and vacated his small chamber. A tawny moon cast its light upon the twin-peaked mountain, and as he studied that titan of rock his disquietude sharpened. He had never seen such a sight, a tremendous thing that resembled a slumbering daemon with wings folded at its shoulders. He became aware again of thirst and curiosity, and so he walked to the main section of town until he came to an establishment from which a raucousness issued. Entering, Stanley scanned the room. Three persons sat at the nearest booth, two of whom he recognized. Simon, attired in clothing that had been fashionable in the 1930's, sat with his eyes shut and his shirt partially unbuttoned. Young Cyrus was seated next to him and held onto a bottle and rag. As Stanley approached their table, the squat dark-haired woman among them stopped whatever she was doing to Simon with her razor and turned to gaze at the outsider. Her eyes were dark and slightly slanted. With bizarre motion she helped the razor to him, as if presenting it as a gift.

"Is it not exquisite?" The woman's voice was low and husky, thickly accented, and he suspected that she might be Romani. "'Tis Victorian mortuary razor, for the final shave." She smiled and looked as if she might cackle at any moment. "Very old, and yet the ivory handle has not yellowed. So white, like the pallid faces at which it worked. The blade—so sharp."

She pressed the blade to Simon's exposed chest as the beast partially opened one eye and examined the outsider. "Ah, it's you. Sit, join us. Cyrus, get our guest a pint of Sesqua grog." He raised a hand and touched the woman's arm. Magda—continue." Stanley pulled up a chair to the table and sat, fascinated at the performance of the woman's blade working at the mark of scarred flesh on Simon's skin. And it did seem like part of some presentation, a ritual for public view. Cyrus returned with two pints of dark liquid, one of which he handed to Stanley. Taking the glass, Stanley touched it to the one that Cyrus held, and then he tentatively sipped the frothy brew. It tasted very good indeed.

He studied the woman's work. "I've seen that symbol before. It's runic, isn't it? I noticed a series of such sigils attached to a tree deep in the woods. And weren't they also set in stones at the entrance of your tower?"

"It's a regional hieroglyph especial to the valley, a representation of thresholds. Used wisely it allows one to enter, symbolically, mystic realms. Etched onto flesh, it allows influences to enter into one's corporeal tissue. We adorn ourselves with such insignia in preparation for Old Twelfth, the time when that that is is not, when we become the Other and dance beyond the rim."

"I thought Twelfth Night was in early January?"

"This has naught to do with Christian holiday. Our ceremonies are our own." Simon shut his eyes again as Magda completed her work. Cyrus placed a scented rag to Simon's sepia flesh, and the beast opened his eyes again and stared at Stanley. The outsider felt his flesh chill as those silver eyes peered at him, those eyes that, he now noticed, contained iridescent particles of outré color. When the young man took away the rag, Stanley saw that there was no trace of blood on either rag or flesh; there was only the sigil, raised as white scar.

Magda joined Simon in observing the outsider. Crookedly, she smiled and raised the razor toward him. "Try it."

"Oh, I don't think..."

"It doesn't hurt," Cyrus piped. "The blade is cool and smooth. It's soothing. See here, I had this made on my shoulder. You'll need a mark for tomorrow night. Unless you have no interest in participating." Stanley sighed and sat back in his chair; and then he stiffened momentarily when Simon tilted to him and began to unbutton his shirt. The beast's countenance was very near his own, and Stanley took in the strange fragrance of the Sesquan's flesh as his shoulder was exposed.

"What mark we give him, eh?" Magna queried in her gravelly voice. She frowned as Simon reached for the razor and took it from her hand.

"Allow me to assist."

Magda shrugged. "As you wish, beast." Stanley felt a wave of panic wash over him as Simon touched a talon to his breastbone. The creature's warm breath fanned his face, and the silver eyes seemed to darken subtly as Simon pressed the razor's sharp point into the human's skin. Stanley had to shut his eyes, and as he did so the idea of Marta's fear of the silver-eyed

ones, as expressed in Kathleen's notebooks, came to mind. The blade, smooth and cool, began to etch into the outsider's flesh. Images came to mind, whirling in memory: the sigils of the purple tree, their replication in the Yellow Deck. In memory he saw the deck's cards spread before him on the bed of his little room, until each and every one was captured in his mind. He watched, and the cards moved subtly so as to form queer words of an alien tongue. How he could utter those words was beyond his comprehension, but his deep breathing began to issue forth as rare language.

The blade's movement ceased. When he opened his eyes he saw Simon's large hand reach for the bloodstained hand on his shoulder. Amazement flashed in Simon's remarkable eyes. "Did you hear what you were uttering?"

"What?"

"Are you familiar with the Aklo language?"

"What?" the outsider repeated, confused by the intense gazing he met from every other pair of eyes.

"It's a language used in ritual, a summoning of other dimension." Magda told him in a soft, low voice that was little more than a whisper.

"I don't know what you're talking about. I've told you, I don't dabble in the occult."

"It seems to have dabbled with you, sirrah." Keeping his hand on Stanley's shoulder, he turned to Magda and spoke to her in an unfamiliar tongue.

"Va," she answered, rising and exiting the establishment. Stanley looked around and saw that the place was almost empty of occupant.

Stanley suddenly felt restless and pushed Simon's hand from him. He saw that it had been stained with his blood, and frowned as the beast brought that hand to his mouth. "I thought you said there'd be some gathering of artists here tonight."

Cyrus, to whom the comment was addressed, looked awkwardly at Simon and bit his lower lip.

"They were discouraged, not wanting to congregate with me in attendance. They are, at times, a rather unadventurous coterie."

"And you enjoy intimidating them."

Simon gazed at the human with a sneer playing on his misshapen mouth. "Have you some strange insight into my character? Or do you merely dislike me?"

"Everyone refers to you as 'beast.' At first I wondered why. I wonder no longer."

Simon burst out laughing. "Wonderful!" He touched his hand once more to Stanley's new wound. "Is there pain?"

"None."

"Excellent. But how sleepy you suddenly seem. So ready to sink into a realm of dreaming. Your heavy eyes—how can you keep them from shutting?"

And the outsider found that he was, suddenly, quite weary. The drink, he thought, was having its effect. Heavily, he picked himself up and stood with uncertain balance, his hands on the table supporting him. An arm linked with his own, and he smiled at the lad who began to escort him from the building. As they exited the place, a low sound of some haunting melody issued from within the place. Someone was playing a flute, a sound that seemed to follow Stanley to his little room, a song that echoed inside his head as his eyes closed in slumber.

V

He walked through shadow and mist, in a realm of rich dreaming, past trees that subtly danced in soft morning light. He watched the swaying limbs of branches and heard the rustling as leaves were kissed by wind. There was something vaguely threatening about that wind, as if it might assault his mouth and steal his mortal breath; and so he kept his mouth clamped shut, however much he wanted to chant the music that came from some distant place. He looked, through pale light and swaying shadow, as the ancient erection rose before him. Approaching the round tower, he pushed one hand against the arched opening and felt the embossed emblem beneath his palm; and as he kept his hand upon the sigil, the mark on his shoulder began to burn, and that sensation rose to his brain and infected his

sight. Reality as he had understood it transformed, and that that was was not. The very ground on which he stood seemed to vanish from underneath him, and he felt as though he walked on air as he crossed the threshold and entered into the tower. The circling steps he climbed seemed like some coiled serpent on which he walked, and the air breathed in altered in substance as he approached the higher region of the darkened step-way.

He strode onto a round wooden floor, into a spacious chamber that was cluttered with shelves of books and tables littered with manuscripts and writing implements. Simon sat on one large table with a flute at his mouth, the source of the music that had lured Stanley to the site. The beast of Sesqua Valley looked so real that Stanley reached out to touch the grotesque face, and Simon smiled as he licked the outsider's palm.

"This is a rare dream," Stanley whispered.

"Dream, sirrah?"

The human laughed lightly. "Well, it must be, I could never have found this place in actuality. As I said, a rare delusion. Everything seems so real, however much my senses have been altered."

"Altered in what way?"

Stanley moved away from the table and raised his hands, as if trying to touch the aura of the place. "Everything feels different—the light on my eyes, the fragrant air breathed in, the texture of stone and wood. My voice sounds like something detached from my being, and I can't feel my mouth moving as I speak. And the cards in my jacket pocket feel so weighty, as though they were the one solid thing in this phantasy of dreaming."

"How queer," Simon answered as he watched Stanley reach into a pocket and produce the Yellow Deck. Stanley unwrapped the black cloth and dropped it onto the table, and then he began to shuffle the deck. Finally, he placed the deck onto the table, took hold of Simon's hand and brought it so as to touch the deck. They moved their hands away and Stanley gazed intently at the deck, and then he reached for the topmost card. But his hand was stopped by Simon's. "One moment, sirrah. Let us take this one card and set it aside, shall we?"

"One card unturned," the mortal whispered. And then he began to do his spread, thinking he would use the Celtic Cross layout. The cards, however, seemed to have another idea, dictating to his hand where they wanted to be placed. When the spread was completed, Stanley saw that it

resembled in design the mark that had been etched into his shoulder. His eyesight altered once more, so that he fancied that the diagram shimmered with sentience. He protested as Simon disarrayed the cards and collected them, then wrapped them in their cloth and returned them to the outsider.

“It is time for you to return these to Leonidas. Good day.”

Thus dismissed, Stanley found his way down the circling steps and out of the tower. The woodland, as he walked through it, seemed of more substance, and when he reached the road that took him to the old mansion where he had his room, he knew that he was fully awake. How weary he felt as he entered the building and climbed the carpeted stairs. His room was warm and so he opened the one window and stood staring out of it at the sparkling stone of the white mountain. When at last he backed away and dropped onto his bed, the image of the twin-peaked titan was an enchantment that stayed upon his eyes as he fell toward slumber.

Again he awakened, in his rented room, where the pink glow of sunset filtered through the window. He groaned as he pushed himself to a sitting position, for his shoulder was especially painful. As he yawned he felt the weight of the Yellow Deck in his jacket pocket, for he had fallen asleep without undressing. Standing, Stanley walked to the window and looked out at the spectacular view of Sesqua Valley at sunset. He knew that his senses had been altered in some way, but the magical sight before him seemed a natural phenomenon of the region. He watched the groups of people who were journeying to some specific location and felt an ache to join them, and so he vacated his room and the old mansion, finding Leonidas standing on the long porch.

“You are looking rather rumpled, sir.”

“Yep, fell asleep without undressing. Are they off to the ceremonies?” He waved a hand at the passing folk.

“They are indeed. May I escort you, Mr. Kaplan?”

They moved off the porch as Simon and Cyrus were coming along the roadway with pipes at their mouths. Both children of the valley were shirtless, and Stanley noticed the embossed diagrams of scarred tissue on their chests. He turned to look enquiringly at his partner. Leonidas smiled and held up one hand, on the back of which a sigil had been etched.

They walked as sunset turned purple and darkened as twilight, not stopping until they came upon a large meadow and the tall black stone pillar

that stood there. Others were playing a variety of musical instruments and dancing in the gathering darkness. Many had completely discarded their clothing, exposing the emblems etched onto their flesh to starlight. Nodding his head to the music, Stanley took the deck of cards from its pocket and then removed both jacket and shirt. Night's wind kissed his naked flesh and slipped into his mouth, where it mingled with his moaning. A number of people encircled him, some of whom reached out to touch his shoulder as wonder flashed within their eyes. A number of those eyes were of silver hue. He looked down at his shoulder and was amazed to see that the etched emblem was glowing as if composed of yellow illumination.

Stanley felt an enchantment on his tongue as he studied the combined sigils on those who gathered round him. He began to speak loudly as he deciphered the combined signs, which formed an arcane language. All music stopped, and Simon was suddenly before him, wonder and amazement flashing in his unholy eyes.

“Speak it again! Great Yuggoth, we have never heard it so announced! Shout it, to the stars and beyond them!”

The outsider caught their fever. He shouted the alien tongue and then joined the screaming of ecstasy as the golden archway appeared before them, the arc of fire on which glowing emblems had been embossed. Stalking to the amazing threshold, Stanley unwrapped the Yellow Deck and held up the cards. One by one the cards flew from his hand and positioned themselves within the glittering archway, until one card only was left in Stanley's hand, unturned. The mortal world transformed around him and became unreal. He felt his flesh alter as well, until he was not the thing he had been. The archway alone seemed valid and substantial, and he smiled as he crossed its threshold, as the unturned card he held burst into flame, as did his frame of flesh.

The children of Sesqua Valley watched and howled, as Stanley began to resemble a spool of melting celluloid. Yet still he mouthed the arcane language, that immortal and outrageous idiom, until the archway flickered and faded and took him from their view.

An Ecstasy of Fear

I

Sarah Paget-Lowe stepped off the train and into fog, a miasma so thick she could not see the majority of the small train depot. She stood and shivered in the chilly air, and then looked up at the sound of beating wings. A hazy shadow drifted over her, the outline of some large winged thing. Looking at the copy of Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* that she held, and that she had read during portions of her long journey, she smiled bemusedly. The thin book had dark green boards and its text was illustrated with color reproductions of artwork by the author's elder brother, Dante. Had her choice of the book been a kind of presage, indicating what she could expect in this unfamiliar setting? Two figures approached her from different directions, and she waved a hand to the porter who carried her bags. Then she turned and named the young poet, Akiva Loveman, as he floated to her through the mist.

"I apologize for the fog—it's quite unwarranted; usually our weather is fair and fine. Are these your bags?"

Sarah answered in the affirmative as the train pulled away and disappeared into the brumous cloud that had settled over the valley. She then followed her friend onto a dirt road and to the place where his car was parked. Her mouth curved at the sight of that vehicle. "This is yours, this beautiful relic?"

"Yes. It's a 1928 Model A Ford Sedan. A local fellow sold it to me after I first moved to Sesqua Town. It runs perfectly well. I had new upholstery put in, but otherwise it's mostly original."

She watched as he placed her luggage into the back seat of the car. Then he slammed shut the door, turned to face her and held out his hands. "Welcome to Sesqua Valley. I imagine you're exhausted."

“I’ve never traveled so far by rail. It was a long journey, and I am a little tired.”

Escorting her to the passenger side of the car, he opened the door and stepped aside as she bent to enter the vehicle. “I have some nice stew and home-made bread awaiting you, and then you can have a quick bath and sleep as long as you like.”

Sarah moaned in pleasure and sank into the soft leather of her seat, trying to fight the temptation to shut her eyes during the brief trip from the depot to Akiva’s small house, into which she followed him as he carried her baggage from the car. She laughed, dismayed, as she scanned the cluttered living room in which they stood. “I thought gay men were neat and tidy by instinct. Good lord, Akiva, this place is chaotic! And what on earth is that?”

Akiva followed the direction of his guest’s stare. “Ah.” He walked to the statue and knelt to the altar he had built before it. She watched as two squat black candles were lit, and then the poet ignited a stick of incense. He did not rise as he spoke to Sarah. “Do you know the work of Bernard Buffet? He was a French painter linked to Expressionism, and illustrated editions of Cocteau’s *La Voix Humaine* and Lautréamont’s *Les Chants de Maldoror*. There’s a rather wonderful print he did of Dante, and when I first saw this statue I thought perhaps it was an effigy of the poet in the Buffet tradition, mistaking the spikes atop the dome for an exaggerated laurel wreath. Since then I’ve discovered a rumored legend of a dark god of chaos, who is said to wear a triple crown. Little is known of this supernatural being, although its myths are multitudinous, and its aspects are so varied that it has been said to be a kind of shape-shifter. Artists have often depicted it as a haughty Pharaoh of elder Egypt.”

Slowly, he rose to his feet and turned to smile at Sarah. “And you now think this is a representation of that deity?”

Lightly, the poet laughed. “I call it the Nameless Eikon. I burn incense and speak poetry in its honor. But I do not know his name.”

“‘His’? The attire, as it has been sculpted, seems genderless.”

“Men in ancient Egypt sometimes wore long clothing far more elaborate than what women wore. I usually address him as male because the chap I purchased him from did so as well, and he seemed to be an authority on the figure. Well, he hinted of the myths that whisper the legend of the thing. And isn’t there something about statues that have their palms facing

forward, as this one does? I think I read that somewhere. That strikes me as a compelling gesture, for some reason—as if the thing is waiting for us to kneel before it and kiss the hand that is held aloft. I found it in a local antique shop and purchased it for a goodly sum. It gives the room such a splendid atmosphere, I find.”

“I hope you’re not being reckless with your inheritance.”

“No—no; not that two million is a lot these days. And since finding this hidden spot, my wants are inexpensive. I spend most of my fortune on rare first editions. I do a lot of traveling to bookshops around the country. It’s an extremely pleasant existence.”

She began to move about the room, walking to a tall oak bookcase that did indeed seem crammed with rare old books. “I’d get lonely for the city.”

“You wouldn’t if you lived here. It’s a fascinating little town. I’m so glad you accepted my invitation.” He walked to where he had set down her luggage and picked up her bags again. “Come on, I’ll show you your room. I almost never sleep in there. I’ve turned the smaller bedroom into a kind of office and library area, and I spend so much of my time there that I’ve installed a little cot.”

Sarah followed Akiva into a spacious bedroom. She admired the beautiful antique furniture that gave the lie to his statement about spending his fortune mostly on rare books. “This is delightful, it has a fine feminine air about it. You have a woman’s way, my dear.” He grimaced at her, although she ascertained that he was, in part, pleased with her praise. Walking to the window, she gazed out of it and frowned. “The fog has yet to lift.”

“Have you any appetite? Come on, let’s have a bit of food and wine, and then you can bathe and retire. You look travel-worn.”

“I can eat a small portion, and a glass of wine would be lovely. I’ll bathe in the morning. That bed looks so damn comfortable that I want to sink into it now.”

They retired to the small kitchen and she allowed him to serve her a small bowl of stew and a plate of bread that was still warm from the oven, on which she spread delicious garlic butter. As they shared their repast, she studied the young man before her, and he smiled at her investigating eyes. “Do I meet with approval?”

“You’ve aged.” He frowned in response. “Rather, you’ve matured. You still resemble a very young Rudolph Valentino, albeit with larger ears. Your sleek black hair quite shines, and your profile has never seemed so handsome. I think it’s your eyes that have changed—they’ve lost their juvenile frivolity. They’ve darkened with experience. This bread is delicious.”

He grinned at her change of topic as they sipped the last of their wine in silence, and then she rose from the table and returned to the living room, the aura of which caught her curiosity. Akiva followed her and seemed suddenly anxious. “Do you really find me so changed? Aren’t I as charming as I used to be?” She turned to him and saw a flicker of his former adolescence, his uncertainty and need to be liked. Walking around the room, she studied the various figurines, the objets d’art, the queer paintings on the walls.

“You’ve developed a taste for the macabre.”

He shrugged. “I’ve always had it. It’s become more acute since coming here.”

“You’ve been here half a year? How long do you plan to stay?”

“Indefinitely.”

“But what’s here that holds you?” He shrugged again, yet she thought his eyes were cautious, as if he knew secrets that he could not yet share with her. That was another new element in his personality, for he had been so garrulous with her in the past, sharing his ideas and passions and miseries without hesitation. Suddenly weary, she yawned; and then she went to him and kissed his brow before retiring to her room. It was in the bedroom that she sensed the lad Akiva used to be: here were the shelves crammed with Penguin Classics paperbacks, of which he had been so fond, and here the walls wore paintings that depicted scenes from Shakespeare and Dante and Milton. The atmosphere of the room seemed lighter than that of the living room, where his new and darker nature seemed to lurk. Stepping to a window, she looked out and saw nothing but thick mist. Not bothering to close its curtains, she walked away from the window and went to where her bags had been placed.

Sarah undressed and got into bed, resting her reading glasses on the bedside table next to its ornate antique lamp. Just as she was about to switch off the lamp, Akiva appeared at her door. Quietly, he entered the room and

sat next to her on the bed. "This is my newest work," he whispered, handing her a notebook. "It's still very rough, but I thought it might interest you. No, don't look them over now, you're sleepy. Wait for the morning, when you'll be rested and attentive."

"My dear child, you cannot give me this and not expect me to glance at it before retiring. Now, go and close the door. I'm in need of silence and solitude."

He took her hand and kissed it, and then he vacated the room. Reaching for her glasses, Sarah donned them and opened the notebook. Akiva's admirable hand had written out the lines of poetry in violet ink, the same shade with which he penned his correspondence. Sarah glanced at the first two poems, which were his usual kind of sonnet, the form he liked best. They were admirable poems of praise that paid tribute to the beauty of Sesqua Valley, one of which sang of a twin-peaked mountain of white stone that seemed to stand as emblem of the region's unique nature. She then turned the leaf and came upon the curious thing. She read it twice, her forehead furrowed.

"Out of the depths of dreaming came
The antique thing that called my name.
It shook me from my placid rest,
Commanding me to kiss its breast.
My mouth pressed to its marble hide.
New longing was not satisfied.
The pale thing called me brother, said,
'I am the Dreaming and the Dead,
Fallen from distant vortices,
From whirling far-off galaxies,
Past dying suns and chilly stars.
I come to kiss thy psychic scars.'
Looking down I was perplexed
To see the beast was double-sexed.
'Kiss me there,' it spoke to me,
'And penetrate my mystery.'
I did not heed its queer command;
Instead I took its pale hooked hand

And with its talons pierced my eyes.
Through blood and tears I scanned the skies.
I saw the crawling stars that named
Me as their own. Thus I am claimed.”

This was like nothing he had written before, and although it was too strange to be understood, its imagery whirled within her skull. Sarah set the notebook onto the wooden floor and shut her eyes. When the pale antique thing crept to her from its secret lair, she struggled mentally to awaken. Instead, she felt the hooked hands that pressed her mouth unto a marbled breast.

II

Soft light filtered through morning mist and illuminated the valley. Sarah raised her face to it and shut her eyes, letting the texture of her skin drink in the subtle warmth. This was a nice alternative to the dark troubled dreaming she had experienced during the night. She inhaled the fragrant air of Sesqua Valley as her toes, curling, pushed into yielding earth. The air, as Sarah sucked it in, tasted sweet, almost cloying, as if composed of elements that were of a different nature than that with which she was familiar. As she scanned the surrounding sights, it felt almost as if she had entered into a fairyland. The place was so different from Providence, had such a singular atmosphere. There was an impression of agelessness in the region, and to have entered it was to fancy that one had stepped out of time, stepped into some province that was unspoiled by modernity, although it contained aspects of human dwelling. But even that seemed queer to her: each dwelling that she had looked upon possessed its own queer personality, its own peculiarity of design.

Sarah stared past the woodland, to the distant twin-peaked mountain. The stone of which the mountain was composed sparkled in the soft morning light. Like everything else in the valley, this titan of white rock contained its own distinct and curious personality. The tall twin peaks

resembled arched pointed wings that sprouted from daemoniac shoulders. To gaze at the mountain was to feel that it could rise at any moment and stalk toward one, crushing one's puny shell of flesh and bones beneath a mammoth hoof. As she gazed at it some shapeless blurred thing, black and winged, rose from it and then descended into the mist that covered much of the woodland.

A hand touched her shoulder. Sarah looked at Akiva and returned his smile. "Enchanted by our local beauty?"

"That is exactly right. Utterly mesmerized. I've never seen so many trees. It's a wonderland of beauty. You're up early."

"I have a new thing I'm anxious to continue working on."

She nodded. "I read some of your new work. I found it rather odd. It has a quality that I can only describe as 'sinister.' Why does that make you smile so broadly?"

"Because I call these new things the work of my left hand. Living here, in Sesqua Valley, has had an effect on my imagination. I dream differently. Instead of the human noise that I had grown so used to in the city, I now listen to the whisperings of nature, its secret sounds. New sensations have resulted in new poetic visions, an innovative form of expression. Coming here has invigorated me as an artist. I thought, perhaps, it may have a similar effect on you."

The woman laughed lightly. "Ah, because of my taking a break in writing. You think I need a little kick in the aesthetic derrière. No, no. The truth is, I've been much too active, especially since Wilus died. I had no idea that he, too, had a heart condition, he never told any of us. He was my senior by half a year, and when he suddenly died at home I took it as a sign that I would be next. Foolish and melodramatic, I know, but there you are. It's surprised you, my having two books published this year; I've always made it a habit to wait a year or two before writing a new book. What you don't know is that I have three more completed books awaiting publication. Hopefully only two of them will be published next year. I went through a phase of mad productivity, because I thought I would be dead by the end of this year and I didn't want to die without having added significantly to my oeuvre." She looked at him and shrugged. "My doctors tell me that my heart is on the mend. I have thus slowed down, stopped writing. Now I can

delve into other things, I can travel a bit if I feel up to it. Best of all, I can be lazy and relax. There you have it.”

“Excellent. All I knew was that you told me you had stopped writing for a while, and that distressed me. I invited you here to give you a taste of the inspiration that has recharged my creativity, hoping it could do the same for you. I still hold on to that hope. Sesqua Valley will inspire you in ways that are new and novel.”

Sarah shrugged. “I have no intention of doing any work here—or anywhere, for at least two years. But, yes—new inspiration, a new approach—that would be most welcome. I would like the next book I write to be absolutely unique.”

“Your work has been so urbane—to the point where you’ve been described as a female Henry James, the writer who has inspired you the most. You have a knack for outré characters, but your settings lack imagination. I think that the valley will aid your facility for distinctive characterization, giving you a different background in which to drop your freaks and fools.” Akiva turned away from her and looked down the road toward the main section of Sesqua Town. “My friend has a charming café that serves the finest French toast I have ever tasted. Let’s go.” He linked his arm with hers and led her down the dirt road, to the main business section of town. They spent an hour at breakfast, and then Sarah said she wanted to investigate the area.

“If it’s going to inspire new work, I need to take it all in and drink the ambiance. I confess I find this little area charming, like something from a 1950’s movie set. This town wears an aspect of unreality. Its inhabitants dress in a simple way that is neither modern nor outdated. I’ve seen but two cars. The quietude is like nothing I’ve known—where are the birds? Come, Akiva, show me this remarkable setting.”

The poet led her away from the café and onto the sidewalks that were composed of planks of sturdy wood. Sarah drank in the rustic aura of the town as Akiva, in his low voice, spoke of various venerable homes and their inhabitants. Some of the Victorian-seeming dwellings would have fitted perfectly in Providence, for which she was becoming just a little homesick.

“You’re frowning,” her friend informed her.

She glanced around her before she answered, her eyes catching sight of the twin-peaked mountain. When she looked at him and tried to laugh,

her noise was not successful. “I feel as though I’ve wandered into some alien realm wherein I am unwanted. The beauty of the place is fantastic—and yet one feels guilty soaking it in. To gaze too long a time at that white mountain makes me feel positively sinful, and I ache for my eyes to sink deeper into their sockets in escape. I’m not supposed to be here.”

“I remember feeling exactly the same, especially when I began to meet the locals.” He paused, as if trying to decide how much he wanted to confess. “You don’t want to keep peering at the mountain—it doesn’t like to be scrutinized.”

She did not heed his curious advice. “It looks like some strange slumbering beast. Those incredible arched peaks—they could be wings on a daemon’s back, ready to spread and lift the creature into the air. Whatever brought you to this place, Akiva?”

“A book of poems. A rare secret book, that outsiders like me were never meant to see. And yet—I don’t feel like an outsider any longer, and I’m happy to be here. I’ve discovered things here that sing to me and seduce me into staying. She is such a one.”

Sarah’s eyes followed the direction of his hand, and then her eyes grew wide. Across the road, bathing in the morning sunlight, was a magnificent sphinx. Captivated, the woman crossed the road and stood before the gigantic statue, and then she heard Akiva breathing beside her. “No—it’s not Greek, as you can tell from the headdress. Too, there are neither wings nor breasts. This is a child of Egypt, where such figures are usually male. The face is amazingly androgynous, however, so you may be excused for thinking it female.” She moved so as to look beyond the sculpture, past a low stone wall and into a spreading cemetery, wherein she espied a number of unusual monuments. Akiva’s hand stopped her as she began to move toward the area.

“I’ll show you the Hungry Place tonight—in moonlight.”

“The Hungry Place?”

He held up a hand and nodded, as if to say that all would be explained eventually. “Come, let’s wander in the woods. You’ll find it charming.”

He linked his arm to hers and led the woman away from town, toward the wide expanse of woodland; yet as they approached the area she felt that it would prove impenetrable, unwelcoming. The trees were too unnerving, twisted and ominous; the spaces between those trees were dark and

foreboding, and although she espied no creatures in those spaces she felt that they were the haunts of hidden imps. The poet seemed to sense her hesitation and turned to smile at her; he laughed lightly at the expression on her face and then brought her hand to his mouth and kissed it. But she did not like the shape of his lips as they curled in mirth—his expression seemed curiously cunning. He was, she reflected, the author of the weird verse that she had read the previous evening, a tainted soul, strange and perplexing. She knew that he had altered, that his brain had somehow been bent by the influence of Sesqua Valley and her secret ways. But then the idea of her fear, her absurd sense of danger, caused her to chuckle as well. They made no sense, these new apprehensions, these confusions. She really was in need of a rest.

Darkness swallowed them, as they found a pathway that twisted through the woodland. The foreboding atmosphere dissipated. Immediately, Sarah's sense of unease dissipated. The shade of the place felt soothing on her eyes as she stepped on ground that was cushioned with leaves and soft mossy earth. The air sucked in had altered and was no longer cloying but refreshing and minty in taste. Somehow, light of a kind fell onto various places, dimly illuminating the woodland and making it easier for her to take in her surroundings. She could not feel a breeze moving through the place, and yet the trees sometimes moved, subtly, as touched by gust. Black boulders of remarkable size and shape were everywhere, and at one point they passed a deep ravine, at the bottom of which she could espy a murky stream that reflected patches of fallen radiance.

A distant sound caught their notice, and Akiva ceased all movement. Although his face was encased in shadow, Sarah could sense his distress, and when she touched his arm it trembled beneath her hand. Her mouth parted as she prepared to ask him what it was he feared, but then the music grew in resonance. Eerily compelled, the woman moved away from her friend, toward the uncanny tone. She witnessed the place where blackness reeled, a whirlwind of gloom, within which odd music sounded. And then the spinning darkness fell before the figure that stood there, lowering as if to grovel at the creature's feet before melting entirely into the earth. Sarah watched the outline take on a more solid form as it removed something long and lean from its mouth. The only features that were clearly evident were two slanted eyes that shimmered as if composed of liquid mercury. As the

figure began to drift toward her, Sarah was kissed by an thrill of fear such as she had never known, and yet she could not turn away and flee. She had been caught completely. Someone behind her wrapped their arms around her waist, but Akiva remained silent as the beast drew nearer and then stopped. Sarah's alarm sharpened as she experienced the entire trembling of her friend's body as he held her.

"Ah—Loveman, it's you. What curious expressions you both wear. Has something in our wooded realm haunted you?"

"Yes, your piping. I've never heard anything quite like it. It was more than music—it was like some evocation of lost or secret things, and it aroused a kind of fear that such things might once again be located." She stopped, as if suddenly aware of her words. "Oh dear, what nonsense I'm talking!"

The tall man slipped his flute into an inside pocket of his jacket as Sarah took in his attire, which resembled that of another era. This fellow could have stepped out of the 1930's. His alchemical eyes had lost a little of their brilliance, and they now had to compete with the fantastic nature of his ensembled facial features. She had never met anyone so grotesque, with an ugliness that seemed, in a way, inhuman. Certain characteristics of his face seemed amphibian, but the general outline of the face reminded her of a deformed wolf. His voice was cultured and his enunciation crisp, as if language was something he relished and spoke carefully. Although his hair was mostly covered by a hat, she sensed that he wore it long, in the fashion of a young Oscar Wilde. He cocked his head and smiled at Sarah.

"Oh contraire. Your words were quite applicable. You have been touched by our local sorcery. I will leave you so that you may revel in the wonder of it all. But don't loiter in the woods overlong, Loveman—you know how it at times affects your imagination. Your previous howling still echo in mine ears! Au revoir." His smile lingered a few moments longer, and then he turned and nodded to Akiva as he ambled down the path and out of sight.

"That man is a freak. What on earth was he nattering about, your howls?" She turned to her friend, whose face was mostly eclipsed in shadow; but she could sense the fear that caused his eyes to tremble, the fear aroused by the creature they had just encountered. Sarah could not suppress a shudder. "I think I'd like to get out of here," she told her friend

as the shadows of the area darkened around them. Taking hold of Sarah's hand, Akiva led her from the lonesome place.

III

(From the journal of Sarah Paget-Lowe)

My memory has always been quite keen. However, since returning to Providence my reminiscence of those three weeks spent in Sesqua Valley are beginning to cloud, to dim. It's as if the valley were trying to remove its images from my mind, to cloud my memory. That's why I've begun this journal of my recollections of my days spent with Akiva, who seems now to have forgotten that such a place as Sesqua Valley exists. Here's the weird thing: something in the nature of that valley and the secrets that it revealed to me seems to have touched my eyes with new perception. I have always found the antiquities of Providence charming. I love the sense of the past that one can feel here from walking down certain streets, no matter how modern the city has become. Now, however, my senses have been enhanced, and I am more and more aware of a different kind of aura here, something a bit sinister and secret. I have found pockets of the past that I never noticed before. Once, while sitting on a tabletop tomb in St. John's churchyard, I heard the wind arising, and felt something grasp my hair and press against my ear as though it were some phantom mouth. Disquieting as the experience was, it also rather delighted me. Perhaps this is but one aspect of my new Muse, the thing that has inspired me to neglect the Jamesian novel I've been working on and spend my time writing some delightful horror tales. I read one of these new things to Herbert when he was visiting from New York, and he was riveted. "If you can write a book-full of these things, I'll publish them!" he exclaimed.

I have been followed by a denizen of the valley, I'm sure of it. I noticed it as I was wandering down Benefit Street and stopped to admire a small copse that rises beside an antique house. One small tree that was almost entirely concealed by tall bushes looked so odd that I continued staring at it for quite some time, and then I thought it wasn't a tree at all but

something, some creature, disguised as a tree. I thought it was sunlight catching some bits of moss or whatever and illuminating the tiny patches of growth, but then I fancied that the two tiny spots of brilliance resembled a pair of silver eyes. I rushed away!

One of the things I want to make note of in this journal is the transformation of Akiva Loveman. He is such a brilliant poet, and yet he has always been so nonchalant about his work and its reception. His two collections of verse came about only because of my insistence and my showing his work to my publisher. Although those books garnered some very glowing reviews, they sold poorly, and it was shortly after the publication of the second book that Akiva suddenly vanished, not to be heard from until six months later, when he wrote to me from his new dwelling. He had learned that I had been feeling tired and listless and assumed that this was due to writer's block, when in fact I was simply burned out from having finished too many projects in too little a time. And so he invited me to visit him in what he called Sesqua Town and gave me instructions on how to reach the place by train. I hadn't traveled by train for three decades, and it was a pleasant (although overlong) experience. I had, of course, never corresponded with my friend, as we were both living in this beloved city until his sudden disappearance. Aspects of his letter were peculiar. He expressed himself in queer idiom, and at times I seemed to be reading a macabre prose-poem full of morbid hints and half-expressed emotions. He demanded that I tell no one of my destiny and destroy his letter after having made my traveling arrangements. I did no such thing.

Akiva has changed, in ways I cannot understand. He has always seemed so reserved and serious, living for his art, his love of literature. A new characteristic revealed itself to me during my visit—a coy playfulness. I can best explain this by describing our visit to the Hungry Place, as he called the local graveyard. I've written up the experience as a wee horror story, so my description of it here may become over-literary and fictive in nature. But that's okay. I want to evoke precisely what happened and how it affected us.

My young friend has always been a collector of rare things, mostly fabulous editions of old books. After moving to Sesqua Valley, he began collecting other items, some of them quite curious. For example, he had, on his mantelpiece, a collection of small animal skulls, some of which were

quite bizarre. He laughed when I suggested that some of the skulls were fakes, however cleverly crafted. One thing that caught my attention was a beautiful antique lantern, which he said he had found in a place called Kingsport. It was my interest in the lantern that reminded him of something he wanted to show me.

“There’s a mausoleum in the Hungry Place that I want to take you to. It will help you to experience the new ecstasy I feel for fantastic sensations, the stuff that feeds my latest verse. It’s a place that needs to be visited in moonlight, and the moon tonight is very fine. We’ll take the lantern, for we’ll need its assistance.”

The lantern was on a small cedar table next to the intriguing black statue, and it was before that statue that Akiva made a very bizarre motion. I have said that one of the statue’s hands was held away from its body, palm outward. As I watched him, Akiva stood before the statue and began to mutter strange words in a language I did not recognize, although portions of the words seemed Semitic. I was astonished, because I knew that he had forsaken completely his racial and religious heritage. He then touched his fingers to the upraised palm of the black statue, as a Hebrew might touch the casing that holds a mezuzah parchment, and brought those fingers to his lips. Apparently my astonishment was evident, for he turned to gaze at me with playful wickedness shining in his eyes, and then he brought his fingers to my mouth. My kiss was a tender thing.

“Let’s go,” he told me, grabbing a jacket and leading me outdoors.

We walked beneath the moon and stars, which seemed intimately near in the sky above Sesqua Valley. I noticed, as we walked, how relaxed my friend was, with such a mellow expression on his face. Whatever it was that had drawn him to that mysterious valley, his dwelling there had had an advantageous effect, of that there was no doubt. At one point he began to whistle as he guided me down the dirt road toward town. It was a lengthy walk, and I wondered why he didn’t use his car more often, as he had when he picked me up from the train depot. But I had seen very few cars on the roadways, most people preferring to walk instead. The lack of vehicles added to the quietude of the place, which was striking to a city lass.

After a length of time I espied the large Sphinx statue in the distance, looking eerie in moonlight. I was touched, as we passed the statue, with a sense of mild foreboding, feeling as though the sculpted beast had been

awaiting and was now observing us as we passed it on our way to the walled cemetery.

What strange apprehension I suddenly feel as I prepare to record this memory. So much of my time spent in Sesqua Valley is fading away, and when I try to remember things all I see in my mind is a kind of haze, a mauve mist. But this one midnight stroll is keen and clear, to the point where I can almost taste the fear it arouses. I remember thinking that the moon had never seemed so near to our planet and that I saw that sphere of dust as never before. The cosmos seemed but a little skip away, as if I could jump upward and follow a trail of twinkling stars into the depths of night. Akiva's mellow mood struck me oddly: it should have helped to relax me, but instead it was a source of anxiety, as if he knew secret things that were not to be shared. He led me to an opening in the low stone wall and we entered the graveyard, which he called the Hungry Place. Very few of the stones seemed old, and on many of them there was but a name and date of death. I noticed a change in the air as we stepped onto the cemetery sod, a chilliness that I had not previously noticed. Akiva led me past tombs until he reached a statue that stood upon a colume of marble.

"This is the man who brought me to Sesqua Town," he whispered to me. "The poet, William Davis Manly. I had found a rare edition of his verse in an antique shop in Boston, and I bought it on a whim—or so I thought. Now I feel that I was destined to own it, and to bring it home. The verse affected me deeply, especially the sequence of seventeen sonnets entitled 'The Seventh Sun.' Tucked inside the book was a short epistle to the book's original owner, which mentioned this hidden valley. The more I delved into that book, the stronger was my ache to find this town."

"And this is where the poet is buried?"

"No. I—I don't quite understand what happened to him, people don't care to discuss it with me. I'll find out, in time. I need to become more rooted to this soil. Come on, the place I want to show you is up a ways."

We approached a place where many trees enshrouded what I eventually saw was a large mausoleum. Oddly, the closer we got to it, the darker the sky became, and I noticed a vague stench which my fancy absurdly associated with rotting stone. As we drew nearer the edifice, some large winged thing drifted out of the trees and floated toward the twin-peaked mountain, uttering no cry. I had yet to hear any birdcall during my

time in the valley, nor had I seen any squirrels or other wildlife. However, as I began to listen, attentively, to the aura of the place, I thought that I could detect a sentience, as if some thing was indeed aware of us. I could feel the thing's interest in us, and its appetite. Stopping for a moment, Akiva dug into his pocket and produced a lighter, with which he set fire to the lantern's wick. We climbed the three steps that took us to the crypt's double gates, which we opened together. Inside, we found three immense granite slabs.

"No names, or plaques," I whispered. And then I pressed my hand to my forehead and used my other hand to steady myself on the nearest tomb, for I had been overcome with slight and sudden vertigo. "That was weird," I told my friend.

"No, it's a common occurrence in the Hungry Place. The children of the valley never come here, it affects them strongly."

"It?"

"The Hungry Place and its unholy appetite."

"My dear, you're sounding like one of your fantastic poems. Please, talk sense. A little common sense would benefit me in this macabre place. Ugh! Your lamp is casting the queerest shadows."

"The lamp will light our way."

"Our way to where?"

"Below." He moved away from me, toward a back wall, then paused and turned to smile at me, and once again I felt a tinge of fear, his expression was so abnormal. And then Akiva began to sink into the ground, taking the light with him, which increased my dread. I rushed to where he was descending and saw the large pit and earthen steps leading into a depth of darkness, from which an odor of decay arose. Following his light, I cautiously descended the soft steps, which took us into a small grotto. The air grew very thin and dry. I did not understand why the flame of Akiva's lamp had darkened and grown red, casting a crimson pall all around us. I shuddered at the smell encountered in the chamber, and at the disquiet that the stench inspired. Akiva rested his lantern onto a large oblong slab that looked as if it had been made one-thousand years ago; and I wondered what on earth could have been interred in so large a sepulcher. I then noticed the two items that rested on the slab of stone and reached for the smallest. It was an old diary or some such thing, and judging from its appearance it was

quite aged, a relic of the past. Turning the frayed faux leather cover, I saw a faint script where someone had written a name, which I made out as ‘Harley Warren.’ The pages of the diary were so brittle that I knew it would most likely split and rip in my attempt to read it, and so I shut the cover and returned it to its place upon the slab. Reaching for the other book, I picked it up, surprised that it was so weighty. It too reeked of age, and yet I could tell it was of a more solid construction. It felt nasty in my grasp, moist and squalid, like something that had been retrieved from swampland. Hurriedly, I set it down on the slab and watched as Akiva turned its binding.

“Curious, isn’t it? I’ve never seen such alien-looking and undecipherable characters. Impossible to tell if the pages are printed or if the lines are handwritten. The script is very fine, however foreign. You see that one character, which is oft repeated? Look.”

Picking up his lamp, he stepped away from the sepulcher and to one lightless corner. I gasped at the sight of the thing that stood there. Its stone, I sensed, was as ancient as that of the hoary tomb, and I knew that it was a thing of great age. And yet it was almost an exact replica of the black statue that Akiva kept in his living room. It had an identical stance, with the one arm lifted just a little from its body, palm outward. My friend shone his lantern’s light on that palm, and I saw the character that had been chiseled upon it, the same strange sigil that had been repeated in the text of the outré book.

Vertigo overtook me a second time, and from beneath my feet I felt a growing sensation, a pulse that could have been the strengthening heartbeat of an atrocious beast. In my growing delirium I imagined that the dirt on which I stood was shifting ever so subtly, spreading so as to pull me downward. Frantically screaming, I rushed from that crimson chamber, up the smooth earthen steps and out of the mausoleum. The moon, so large and yellow, sneered at me as I fled the Hungry Place and ran, panting and full of panic, to my friend’s abode.

IV

She awakened on a bed still made, fully dressed yet rested. Light filtered into the room from the window, and glancing at the clock Sarah saw that it was late morning. At some point in the night she had kicked her shoes off, and so she found where they had fallen onto the floor and slipped into them, and then stalked into the living room. It seemed that she was alone in the house, and this inspired her to investigate the living room and its curios. The spacious room was so crowded with bizarre objects that it did indeed seem like a room inside a cluttered museum or antique shop. Sarah avoided looking at the corner where the black statue stood, for it reminded her too sharply of the weird dream she had suffered in the night, that remarkably realistic dream about visiting a haunted mausoleum with her host. Coming to one cabinet filled with books, she opened one of the glass doors and ran a finger over the soft old bindings. Instinctively, she was looking for a slim volume, and most of the books before her were thick and weighty. One by one, she pulled the thin titles out and opened their covers, disappointed until she found the volume with purple binding. Sarah opened the book and read its title aloud: "Visions of Khroyd'hon, by William Davis Manly." Closing the book, she stepped out of doors and studied the valley, its lush woodland, the titanic white mountain that seemed to sparkle in the light of day. She then opened the volume again and read one poem aloud.

"Ah, subtle scream beneath disrupted earth,
Oh, moaning of one mouth beneath the sod,
The choking of one final cry, the dearth
Of air spilled forth in prayer to heedless god.
Allow all breath to cease, allow the stream
Of mortal blood within to stop its course.
Allow the liquid eye to dull its gleam.
Abandon misery, unclench remorse.
Your ache, so lunatic, is realized.
You have achieved your fitful mortal goal.
You have accomplished that so highly prized:
The valley has embraced your mortal soul.
You now are kindred with our shadow-race
As you dissolve beneath the Hungry Place."

It was as strange as Akiva's newest work, and equally disturbing. Where was he, she wondered? Perhaps he had gone to have breakfast in the main section of town. Book in hand, she made the journey to the business area of Sesqua Town and located what looked to be a bar and lounge. Sarah entered the establishment and was charmed by the quaint atmosphere, the feel of the old wood on her eyes, the sense of the past. However, the inhabitants of the place were dreadful, yellowish and gaunt and peering at her with queer pale eyes. She advanced toward the one she recognized, as the others watched her, astonished.

"Have you seen Akiva?"

The grotesque fellow studied her in silence for some few moments, and then his lips curled in what was a ghastly smile. "Sit down, Miss..."

"Paget-Lowe. Thank you, I will. Your bowl of fruit is beautiful." She indicated the large bowl that was filled with a colorful array of apples and Japanese quinces, oranges and melon slices and raspberries, apricots and blackberries.

He smiled as he scanned the delectable display, and then he raised one hand and snapped fingers. "Nathan, a second plate, and some of your cherry coffee." He turned his eyes to Sarah. "You'll enjoy it—it's brewed with organic black cherry flavored beans from Columbia. I discovered it during a stay in Panama. Here we are. Let me select your nourishment. Here are some sublime dates, and this Asian pomegranate is perfection. Let me slice it for you."

"You've not seen Akiva, sir?" She set her book onto the table and watched him at his task.

"Simon Gregory Williams," he introduced himself as he handed her the plate. "Eat, drink. When did you last see Loveman?"

Sarah frowned. "I can't quite remember. I must have been especially tired and gone to bed early last night. I had such a curious dream, about your graveyard."

"Indeed. I'm told that dreams can seem especially vivid in this valley. I do not dream myself." Simon watched her eat and grinned at her obvious enjoyment of the delicious repast. "What brings you to Sesqua Town?"

"Akiva invited me, thinking I needed to get away from Providence. He was mistaken. But I'm glad I came, because I think that being here is having a bad effect on him. He's become morbid. He's started collecting the

oddest of things. Last night he made the strangest ceremonial motions to that awful black statue. No, wait, that was a part of my dream. I think.” She frowned, confused.

“Your dream was very vivid. You’ve slept badly. Perhaps a walk would relax you and help to ease your mind. Will you join me?”

Something in his voice captivated Sarah. This grotesque creature had an air about him that was seductive, and she found that she did want to stroll with him. She watched him rise and allowed him to help her out of her chair, and then she followed him outdoors.

“Are you a poet, like your friend?”

“No,” Sarah answered. “I’m a novelist. My reputation is that of a feminist Henry James, as I deal with social issues that affect my gender. Did you know that it was this book of poems that brought Akiva to this valley?”

She noticed Simon’s momentary frown and almost expected him to snarl. Instead, after a pause, he replied in a low, soft voice. “I have heard whispers of such a circumstance. Loveman’s fallen under the spell of William Davis Manly. It has happened far too often. The book was never meant for outside eyes. The incident of its publication has caused us nothing but mischief.” He had been muttering to himself, but then he seemed to catch himself and smiled at her. “There is a statue of its author just over there—in the Hungry Place.”

Sarah was just about to remark that she had visited the place the previous evening and seen the statue; but then she remembered that visiting the place had been a part of her vivid dream, and this deepened her confusion. “Will you show me?”

Simon frowned. “It’s an unpleasant place, but I suppose we can stop there for one moment. Come, follow me.” The fellow led the way to the low stone wall that surrounded the graveyard, and to the opening in that wall that allowed passage into the place. Sarah felt a sense of *déjà vu* as she stepped onto the cemetery sod and joined Simon as he stood before a high statue that was mounted onto a three-foot column. “Is this what you saw in your dream?”

“Yes. He resembles you, Mr. Williams.”

“We share a similar heritage. Pah, this place reeks, can you not notice the rank that has infiltrated the air? Let us depart.” But then his eyes

widened as they watched the figure that was staggering toward them, the fellow with a fever of madness tugging at his mouth. “Loveman!”

The young poet’s appearance was shocking. Whereas once his entire head of hair had been black and sleek, it now wore a small patch of white strands. His dark eyes were sunken into their sockets and rimmed with red, giving him a lunatic look. The chiseled mouth was wretchedly twisted and stained with slaver. His clothing were rumpled and one sleeve torn at the elbow. As the poet joined them, both Simon and Sarah curled their nose at his stench as they noted the spread of wetness at Loveman’s crotch. The young man raised his eyes so as to admire the statue.

“Yes—yes, that’s him exactly. He could be your twin, Simon, except that his features are softer and he wears his hair longer. He has the most beautiful voice. I could have listened to him all night.”

“What the devil are you chattering about, pathetic wretch?” Simon demanded.

Ignoring him, Loveman turned to Sarah and took her hands. “You shouldn’t have fled. It was fantastic. The slab is large enough, we could both have slept there. Oh, the dreams! The heartbeat of the valley took hold of my own palpitation, and we thumped as one. Didn’t you hear it as you ran away? Why did you fly? I’ve experienced such wonders. Oh! I’ve left my lantern there. Come with me now, and I’ll teach you the sign of Nyarlathotep. It’s delicious, to feel the crawl of chaos creep over one and kiss one’s eyes!”

Simon clutched at the lad and turned him. “How do you know that name?”

“Manly taught it to me, when he showed me the Circle of Seven Suns. I liked the way he felt, his soft padded hand in mine. He’s far friendlier than you’ve ever been.”

“You’ve dreamed of Manly?”

“Don’t be stupid. Although, come to think of it, he seemed a thing of dream as he drifted to me out of the mauve mist. Manly came to me as I reclined upon the slab in the sunken chamber of the Howard mausoleum. He told me how the Howard family had been among the first mortals to settle in Sesqua Valley, how they began to build the town. They corrupted this place of secrecy and wonder, and awakened the children of shadow.” He cast a playful look at Simon. “The first to seep from out the valley’s

shadowland was a potent fellow, richly daemonic and a very devil. Oh, the deadly tricks he played on those early white settlers who dared to invade the sacred land! They were driven away, those pilgrims, but the valley was forever tarnished, and others come, freaks of peculiar bent. The valley accepted them and their absurd ways. He told me of the mountain, which serves as symbol of the valley's majesty, and of its influence over those who wander into this realm. The mountain adores those who are most bent, as I am, and those are the adopted souls of Sesqua Valley. And then he took my hand and guided me to the Circle of Seven Suns and taught me what ritual to perform once I took my statue there. I was so compelled to buy that statue from Leonidas. Now I know why—well, vaguely. Manly marvels that you've yet to figured it out, you're usually so clever, beast. He's been so amused by your 'antics,' as he calls them."

"Sirrah, William Davis Manly vanished from this valley decades ago. His fate remains a mystery. Come, we must remove ourselves from this soil. It has a vile affect and is the cause of your pathetic ranting. Come."

Akiva laughed as he allowed Simon to pull him across the ground and out of the cemetery, followed by Sarah. "You can be such an idiot, Simon. Manly hasn't left the valley. He's dwelling in the second shadowland, the place he's conjured through his sorcery. Haven't you felt his presence deep inside you? He's your brother, so alike that you two almost share a single heartbeat. Don't you heard him singing to you in your dreams?"

"I never dream. This is all rubbish. You have slept within the Hungry Place and it hath made ye mad. Pah—this is what comes from allowing outsiders to enter freely into our demesne. I have warned the others of this, but things have become so lax. What madness you talk! The Circle of Seven Suns? No such place exists."

Swiftly, the poet turned to Simon and thrust his hand against the Sesquan's face, digging his fingernails into Simon's brow. "This hand has touched the seventh statue, the residue of which has left a paranormal stain. Feel it sink into your bestial hide and find your throbbing brain. Let the Circle conjure itself inside your mind. Feel its image bubble in your diseased brain. Yes, there you go! Isn't it fantastic?"

As Sarah watched this performance, she was overwhelmed with a sense of being trapped inside a dream. Her surroundings, and the macabre inhabitants she encountered in it, disturbed her. Akiva Loveman had altered

absolutely, and she did not recognize the man before her now. No longer the shy boy she had known in Providence, the poet seemed to tremble before her with a subdued inner-power that lit his eyes. Sarah was not alone in her astonishment.

“How dare you touch me,” panted Simon Gregory Williams; and yet he did nothing to push the poet from him, and his silver eyes grew more fantastic as Akiva kept his hand on Simon’s brow. The beast of the valley was bewildered, for he had been used to his role of intimidation and control, especially within his valley realm. Although his eyes had remained wide open, dream-like images began to filter into his mind. He saw a steep ravine and a descending trail with broad steps of rough-hewn stone. A wide stream cascaded as waterfall over rocks and boulders and fallen trees in an area that Simon did not recognize. “This is mere delusion and delirium,” he muttered, and yet he could not escape the image in his mind. In vision, he walked away from the singing stream, to an area beneath the trees and ferns where the earth was smooth. It was there that he visualized the circle of diminutive statues, dark gnome-like figures that each held a sphere composed of pale stone. This vision angered the beast, and he sneered. “This is your imagination only. How dare you try and transpose it onto me with your feeble witchery.”

“No,” Akiva countered, “the site exists. Manly took me there.”

“Enough. I will not listen to your babble of secret places and second shadow-lands. I would know if my brother still existed in the valley, in whatever hidden pocket of it. You have fallen under the spell of Manly’s poetry, as have others before you. Incredibly, you seem to have spent a night within the Hungry Place, and as a result of this unheard of behavior you are now utterly deranged. Obviously, you cannot withstand the influence of the valley.” Simon turned to Sarah. “It would be best for you both to return to Providence and not return. You are unwanted here.”

Before either outsider could answer, Simon stalked away. Turning a flustered face to his friend, Akiva cried, “But I did visit it, and Manly lives! Let me share it with you.” He raised his hand to her face, but she blocked his movement with an arm.

“No, don’t touch me.” The harshness in her voice surprised her, and she winced at the painful expression in Akiva’s eyes. Taking hold of his hand, she brought it to her lips and kissed it. And then she, too, walked

away from him.

V

Sarah was in her room, packing things into her small suitcase, when she heard the commotion in the living room. Going to investigate, she saw Akiva striving to lift the strange black statue. Seeming to sense that she was watching, he turned and grinned at her.

“It’s not very heavy, actually. I think I can do this.”

“And what exactly is it that you’re doing?”

“Manly suggested that it would be appropriate to take this to the Circle of Seven Suns, that maybe it would help to evoke the Crawling Chaos.”

The woman laughed. “Akiva, when did you become consumed with all of this esoteric nonsense? I’m beginning to agree with Simon—you need to escape this place. Come with me to Providence.”

“Manly’s book was my key, you see, and the valley is my gateway. I’ve connected with the valley’s laureate, and I think he wants to crown me with his laurel. I am destined to become the valley’s new poet, to sing her glory as it has not been expressed for decades.”

“And why can’t Manly do this himself, if he still dwells here?”

“I think he is conjoined to the second shadowland and can rarely leave it, or rarely wants to.” He noticed the expression on her face and laughed heartily. “God, you don’t understand any of this. How could you? You’re far away from Providence, dear Sarah. Look, I don’t have time to explain it all now. I need to get this eikon to the Circle of Seven Suns. We’ll talk later.”

“Let me help you. I want to see this mysterious place that has so upset Simon.”

“But—I don’t know what’s going to happen when I evoke the Crawling Chaos.”

“Then it will be a learning experience for both of us. Do you think that thing will fit into your car?”

“Only just. I managed when I brought it home from the antique shop. It’s lovely, isn’t it? So smooth and black and—potent.” He wrapped his arms around the statue and began again to try and lift it. Shaking her head, Sarah went to assist him, and together they moved the effigy out of the house and into Akiva’s motor car. Before getting into the vehicle, the poet glanced at the moonlit mountain and frowned.

“What’s wrong?”

Akiva squinted his eyes with suspicion. “It’s too quiet, like the valley is holding its breath. Usually, when something really dangerous or cool is going on, the valley sends out a signal from beneath its ground, a deadly kind of pounding that alerts the children.”

“The children?”

“The ones who have silver eyes, the local tribe, whatever they are. They often refer to themselves as the children of the valley, without ever explaining what that means. I’ve sensed a lot of things in the months that I’ve lived here, but nothing’s concrete inside my mind. Perhaps after tonight I’ll have more answers. Let’s go.”

They both entered the car, Sarah having to adjust her head so that it would not bang against the head of the statue, which was protruding over the back of her seat. She remained silent as the car bounced along rough roads, toward the mountain. The road entered a place in the woodland where the trees overhead formed a kind of tunnel through which they journeyed. And then the trees were gone, and the mortals were moving along an expanse of dirt field. The mountain, now very near, hovered over them like some slumbering behemoth. Sarah cracked her window open and cursed. “Ugh, I thought I smelled something vile. What is that stench in the air? It’s sickening.”

“It emanates from the soil, or so it seemed to on the few occasions that I’ve visited this area. It’s like the ground is cankerous. Look at how yellow the dirt is? The children shun this place. I tried to get my friend Cyrus to join me on an outing here and he freaked out, said something about it being too near the mountain. I think they shun the mountain as well. It’s nice to know that there are places in the valley where you don’t have to worry about meeting its freakish clan. I think we’re almost there.”

“You think?”

“Well, I confess that last night’s all a bit of a haze. But I’ll recognize the wooded area when we get there. I’ll remember the signposts that Manly showed me.”

Sarah could not take her eyes from the bulk of Mount Selta, and something in the shape of the mountain increased her sense of unease. “This place is creepy,” she mumbled; but Akiva ignored her, seemingly intent on locating their destination. And then he stopped the car. “This is the place. It’s not a long walk. Are you sure you want to help me haul that statue down there?”

“I am not yet decrepit,” she scolded, and then bent to pick up the bottom portion of the statue. She felt extremely silly as they entered the woods, and smiled broadly at what a sight they made. Sarah noted that the vile stench in the air had dissipated and was replaced with a new scent, subtle and uncharacteristic of what she had thus experienced in the valley. There were spaces between the trees and thus bright moonlight illuminated their way. Then she noticed what she thought was an extremely freakish tree.

“Ah, there’s the totem. This is the right path,” the poet assured her. Sarah gawked at the towering thing as they passed it, having never seen its like before. The thing seemed skeletal and albinic, and the misshapen faces that it wore seemed composed of rotting mold and resembled no living creatures with which she was familiar. From some place beyond the totem she heard the sound of rushing water, and then she had to watch her step as the path began to incline downward and became a series of large stone steps, beside which a wide stream fell over rocks and boulders. Sarah could not understand why the woodland grew no darker as they descended—indeed, the moon, when she glanced up at it, seemed nearer to earth than it had at any other time. She could see the face in the moon, and the sight of it chilled her blood.

At last they reached the end of sloping earth. Although the statue was not very heavy, Sarah was tiring. When her eyes met Akiva’s, however, she saw that his burned with an almost preternatural ignition. Looking at her, he laughed joyously and showed his shining teeth. “Right over there. Watch your step, there’s a bunch of ferns just here. Can you feel the spray from the waterfall? It’s like drinking liquid aether. Okay, let’s lift him over these sculpted figures and set him in the center of the Circle.”

Trying to study the dwarfish figurines as they lifted the black statue over them, Sarah lost her footing, stumbled and fell onto soft ground. Her end of the statue pressed against the earth, and she let go of it as Akiva wrestled with the thing and put it into place in the center of the ring of stone effigies. The seven sculpted gnomes were grotesque in the extreme and filled Sarah with disquiet. Each creature held a pale white sphere over its dome, globes that caught the weird moonlight and appeared to drink in its luminosity.

“He’s here, I think.” Before Sarah could respond, she felt a beating beneath her hands, a pulsing from some place beneath the earth on which she knelt. The air grew chilly, and a mist began to rise from distant places in the woodland, a mauve-tinted mist that grew opaque. Sarah sensed the presence before she saw its silhouette moving toward them through the gathered haze. He was tall and lean, and he exuded a sense of energy and influence. As his features became clearer she thought it might be Simon without his characteristic hat; but then she noticed the distinction between this being and the beast. The gentleman before her was not quite as grotesque as Simon, although his features were just as animalistic. His eyes shimmered like glossy nickel.

“Greetings, Miss Paget-Lowe,” the stranger said, bowing his head to her. “Welcome to my realm. Please remain silent as we summon forth the Crawling Chaos. Akiva has been chosen to be the bard of the Old Ones.” Turning to the poet, the fellow took Akiva’s hand and smoothed its palm with taloned fingers. He then pierced that palm with one nail and began to etch into the poet’s flesh. Sarah thought that she could smell the blood that dripped from her friend’s hand onto the earth. She watched the tall fellow smooth her friend’s hand with his own, until the drops of blood ceased. Akiva showed her his hand, whereon the sigil that had been carved onto the black statue’s hand had been replicated. Moving out of the Circle, the strange one reached into a jacket pocket and produced a red flute, which he pressed against his mouth. Unearthly music filled the air, as did an unearthly reek. Looking up, Sarah observed the darker mist that was falling toward them through the other vapor, the greenish-yellow mist that churned unspeakably as it ceased its descent and billowed above them. From behind that rancid miasma she thought that she could just make out the circles of blistering globes of fire, and she saw the two winged things that sailed to

them through the fog, beings that had been replicated in stone in the Circle of Seven Suns. The creatures settled near the base of the black statue, against which they huddled as they brought weird flute-like instruments to their misshapen mouths.

Sarah looked to where the child of Sesqua Valley had been standing, but there was no one there any longer. Another shape stalked toward them, through the mist, and Sarah marveled at the black man's regal beauty. She watched the figure drift to where Akiva stood and spoke something to the poet in antique Hebrew. Not rising from her kneeling position, she saw the strange dark one tilt toward her friend and kiss Akiva's eyes, eyes that suddenly transformed, that grew black and liquid. And then the black man turned to her, drew nearer to her as he made motions to the air, the air that cleared of mist and sour fog. She saw the brilliant moon that cast its insane light onto her eyes, and then she howled as the black man raised a foot and kicked her head violently. Her vision blurred and she could see nothing but a congeries of red and black dots. The sound of insane fluting washed to her and embraced her head for but one moment, and then the sound departed, lifting skyward. When at last her sight returned, she saw that Akiva was trembling before her, his frantic fingers reaching at his black and burnished eyes.

"I am blind! Like in the dream I had when I visited the woodland and Simon found me! But this is not a dream! Oh god, I am blind. And yet, I see, beyond the blackness, beyond the dead moons. Oh, I see" he uttered, and then he began to howl like some idiotic thing. Gasping, weeping, Sarah rose and clutched the poet's hand. Roughly, she tugged him from that place, up the rugged path and over the stone steps on which they occasionally tripped as Akiva screeched in Hebrew. When at last they reached the poet's car, Sarah opened the passenger door and pushed the poet into the vehicle. Rummaging through his pockets, she found the car keys and rushed to the driver's door. By the time she managed to turn the motor, Akiva had grown silent. He turned his altered eyes to her and her blood froze as she felt him peer into her paltry soul. "The seven suns," he whispered, and then began to speak poetry of the strangest kind, poetry that contained a kind of alchemy of sound. Sarah listened, entranced, and then she put the car into gear and began to drive. She followed the roadway, away from the twin-peaked mountain, past the center of Sesqua Town, out of the valley. Finding, at last,

the freeway, Sarah pushed on the gas pedal, guiding the car on its way toward Providence.

Unhallowed Places

A Poetic Interlude

Dedicated to Robert H. Waugh

I

It is the effect of night that swims within my liquid eyes as I kneel on this tainted soil and dig my fingers into unhallowed earth. Windsong moans through the cracks and crevices of a ruined church where air is no longer sanctified and sinless, and as I work my hand into the churchyard sod I pray the name of one strange god who tastes me in my deepest dreaming. It is this dread lord that has whispered to my psyche of the thing that I am destined to discover—the thing that, soon, I touch. I tighten my fingers around one of the triple spires and unearth the relic from its bed of dirt and darkness. There is no midnight moon to which I can hold up the artifact, and so I raise the thing to dimming stars and marvel at its alien beauty. I cannot ascertain what strange alloy has been combined with yellow gold so as to give the thing its platinum lustrousness. Its beauty captivates and I gaze at it for many minutes as I imagine that it was fashioned to be seen in darkness only, in this effect of night, wherein its magick spills forth and evokes wonder. I lift the relic above me and set it on my head, where the chilliness of its metal spreads through my entire tissue. I shudder as one bell from an ancient church peals its somber sound. The reverberation of that clanging floats through air toward the sea that swells before the old town below the hill on which the church stands. I turn my face toward the crumbling edifice and see that it, too, has been enhanced by the cloak of night that drapes it; and as I grimace at the rotted stone a thing from within the structure calls my mind, coaxing me to rise from bended knee and proceed in quest of sinister sensation, my diadem tilted on my dome. How solid feels the frigid earth on which I creep, how icy the starlight on my

eyes that I reflect onto the rotted stones with which the church has been constructed. I lean and press my hand against the decomposing mineral and watch the reflected starlight frolic from it and pierce the essence of my eyes; and as my hand is held against that stone my mind seems to conjoin with the chilly surface so that, for one moment, I am as ancient as the granite that has formed the haunt of silenced prayers, and the hollow of my skull reverberates with a remnant of secret ceremony that was once performed beyond the wall I fondle. Ah, those echoed and unholy psalms, the deep low voices, the phantom plumes of rare incense that are sucked by nostrils. Oh, the shape that fumbles in secret festival in the corner of one eye.

I remove my hand from where it touches stone and step unto the threshold, through which I shall enter another realm. One oaken door on partial hinge invites me as I glance at the charred and splintered remnants of its companion on the ground, perhaps the victim of some lightning bolt. I smile at the lingering smell of destruction, and when at last I laugh my voice seems not mine own, and my lips are strangely shaped in alien form. I lick those lips and cross the threshold, into a nameless place, turning corners until I enter the vaulted chamber of some hall, where spectral starlight taints seven stained glass windows. How queerly the dim figures depicted on those windows shift on their smooth surface, where starlight and obscurity conjoin. I smell the smoke before I see it; but this is not the fragrance of ignited annihilation but rather plumes of adoration, coiling from altars where perfume of patchouli mingles with myrrh. But stay—what is that shape behind the veil of smoke, the black emanation that, drifting to me, parts the hazy curtain with its claw? I watch the hand snake through smoke and summon me with esoteric motion, that hand for which I reach and clasp—that hot hand! I see that hand lift mine toward a phantom's face and sigh as the smoldering mouth moves against my skin. I lean nearer and kiss the eidolon.

The being backs away, behind its curtain of perfumed smoke, to where it is encircled by seven shrouded figures that are stained by shadow and starlight. Their alabaster faces remind me of the material with which my diadem has been constructed, and I laugh softly as they open shattered mouths and moan a liturgical chant in adoration of Crawling Chaos. My hands lift to the headdress of white gold and remove it from where it

weighs upon my peak. I reach through fog and crown the eidolon with the relic I have unearthed from haunted soil, as a stream of faces beneath the tiara grin at me, mockingly. The haunter of the dark spreads its arms unto its shining faces, where eyes awaken as sparks that reflect on the shimmering flesh of seven adorers. I feel a fire on mine own eyes as they begin to cinder and melt; but before I lose sight absolutely the phantom filters to me and kisses my dissolving eyes, transforming those orbs of jelly into diamonds through which I peer into unknown dimension.

II

The bell tolled once, and so the lady stirred in her cathedra and raised her heavy head to the vaulted ceiling, where winged images among the broken shadows returned her somber gaze. Her cathedra was spacious and well-lined, its scarlet velvet cushions extremely soft, and on the ivory of its frame were fastened exquisite designs of constellations that made her dizzy when peered at in prolongment. She had no interest in those designs now, for the moan of wind issued from upper regions, among seven stained glass windows kissed by outré starlight. The lady listened to the airy sound and glanced through the haze of smoke and broken shadow that swirled about her, watching it lift to the arched and wounded window through which lonely windsong whistled. There she noticed the place where the window had been violated and its shrouded figure had lost one hand. Lifting like the smoke she rose out of the throne and floated on the floor of cracked stone toward the ruined wall into which the wounded window had been fitted; and there, on the unyielding surface of the floor, she saw the perfect pallid hand of glass, its semi-translucent white form seeming to her fanciful eyes like some murdered dove. Bending, she took up the delicate relic and traced its outline with one finger, and then she touched its smooth surface to her mouth and kissed its palm. Noticing that the alabaster fingers pointed to the crevice in the wall, she raised her fingers to the shrouded figure of the upper window and made to it an esoteric sign, and then she whistled as she squeezed her lithe form through the crevice in the wall, moving until she

stood on churchyard ground. Her legs navigated her among the tombstones, beneath chill starlight, as trees bent above her in gathering wind. When she came to the spot where the earth had been disrupted she stopped and peered at the place where something had been exhumed, where the soil had been carelessly packed into place but not smoothed. There was no slab here to mark what might have been beneath, and so she moved one foot and with the tip of her toe drew a tomblike shape. Chittering, she dropped to her knees and etched her name within the shape with one finger of the hand of glass.

The lady's attention was caught by an arresting cry. She saw the dark creature that balanced on one tombstone and regarded her with jadeite eyes, the wee kitten that did not flee as she approached and clutched it with one hand; and she laughed as it climbed upon her bosom and found its way onto one shoulder, where it roosted so as to purr into her ear, a vibration of sound that leaked into her head and moved behind her eyes, eyes that then beheld the distant archway made of hoary stone. Swiftly, the wee puss leapt from her shoulder to the earth and darted toward the archway, where it stopped and mewed as if to coax her to the spot. She stirred beneath stars and mist and moved to the enticing beast, following it through the archway into another place. The ground she walked on was so soft that it seemed almost as if she walked on cloud, and in the spaces above her the stars looked larger than usual. She fancied that she could feel the kiss of icy stardust on her eyes and mouth. The lady followed the small black beast until she noticed another being, pale and still, in one distant area—a statue of a shrouded figure whereon one raised arm had lost its marble hand. A bell tolled then, a blurred unfocused sound that crept toward her like some sightless freak, and at the vibration of that clamor the wee kitten scampered toward the archway through which they had just passed. She did not heed the beast's behavior, nor did she notice how the statue's solid form softened infinitesimally and shuddered when touched by vibrating air. The lady saw only the outstretched arm that lacked a hand, and thus she flowed to it and tried to fasten the hand of glass onto the place where the statue's limb ended abruptly; but she pressed too violently against the figure's smooth white marble, and her delicate hand of glass broke into three pieces. One sharp tip pricked her finger and she watched the dark liquid that, spilling from her, stained the shattered hand. Dizziness oppressed our lady and she dropped

the pieces of sacrosanct glass onto the soft earth as, from the archway beyond, a little kitten cried.

Our lady stumbled to the archway, and through it, beneath the sky that blackened with breaking storm; and as the rain began to pounce upon her she pirouetted to one ancient tree and bent so as to scoop up the kitten and shelter it in her warm limbs beneath the spread of leaves and branches. She listened to the soothing rainfall and grew drowsy, and leaning her back against the tree she lowered to a sitting position as the deluge and its lullaby coaxed her toward slumber. In soggy dreams she saw seven shrouded figures that moved in ceremony around her, and she could sense the vibrations of their chanted song on the air before their hooded faces; but the sound that awoke her was one single peal that issued from the cracked bell of the ruined edifice. Our lady rubbed her eyes and let her hands fall to her lap, where they touched the stiff dead thing of fur that nestled there. And it confused her when, gradually, she heard an apparition of sound, a ghostly mewling from some nearby place; and she pondered, as she lifted her face and glanced toward the ancient archway, why the wee puss was there, however insubstantially. Our lady watched as the playful sprite ran in circles for some moments and then rushed through the archway, to the feet of one shrouded figure that motioned with an arm that lacked a hand. And so our lady lifted out of her drowsy husk of flesh, which stayed in place against the tree that sheltered it; and she drifted to the archway, and through it, to the ones awaiting her.

III

I found the bottle as I walked along the shore and was surprised by its chilliness as I plucked it from the waves. The object intrigued me with its black-green sheen and queer metallic stopper, which had been shaped so as to resemble a macabre siren's portrait. I held the thing up to the misty sky, where the sun was a whitish ghost behind crawling clouds, and thought it unusual that I could almost see through the murky glass and detect the thing inside the bottle; and this made me smile, because as a child I had been

entranced by tales of treasure maps secreted inside flasks that were tossed into the sea. Using my strength, I pulled the stopper from the bottle's neck, but I was clumsy and the stopper fell out of my hand into the waves wherein I stood. I watched it move beneath those waves for a few seconds and wondered why it seemed to mutate with growth and move its mouth as if in speech. Loquacious bubbles floated to the surface as the stopper became lost in shifting sand.

What an unwholesome stench escaped from the murky bottle, like some festering remnant of discarded flesh. I peered through the neck and saw the bleached scroll inside, then turned the flagon over and shook it vigorously as I walked beyond the waves, to shore. The object inside refused to budge, and so I pressed the container's opening against my lips and blew my living aether within, but the stench inside the thing pushed at me with renewed nastiness and I had to take my face away. I tilted the bottle and tapped its opening against my palm, and after much effort one end of the scroll dislodged and peeked out. I pinched it with my fingers and frowned, for the nasty thing was unpleasant to my touch. Parchment should not be so spongy, unless perhaps this scroll had somehow been tainted by sea water. I unrolled the cylinder and was startled to find that it was not a written record at all but rather a sordid mask, its only openings being the places where a face would own a pair of eyes. I dropped the flask onto the sand and held the mask up to the whitish sun so as to judge its texture; but suddenly my arms began to ache, grew heavy, and without warning they lowered so that the mask covered my face, to which it clung. How curious one's imagination can be, for I half-fancied that I could detect the texture of the mask stitch itself into my flesh. How unfathomable, the way the night tide air tasted as it filtered through the place that ensconced my mouth. The stars looked especially bright, and this confused me because I had not realized that night had fallen—surely there had been muted daylight moments before, when I had first discovered the bottle while wading through the waves. What a curiosity the mortal world can be.

I walked toward and into the city, into a portion of it that I had never known. How ancient and acrid the air seemed as it brushed my faux mouth, against which I pressed my hot tongue as I babbled incomprehensibly to darkness. An elderly light fell from tilted street lamps to the dusty street as infants with mature faces seeped from a decrepit building's doorway and

encircled me, returning my gibberish. They danced around me and called me by some strange name, and then these imps scattered as a tall black woman encased inside a tight yellow gown stalked to me beneath the myriad stars. Rising tempest played with her length of burgundy-colored hair.

Genuflecting before me, the woman took my hand and licked it. “We were not expecting you so soon,” she murmured. “Indeed, we had sensed that you had been mislaid between dimensions and unable to come and herald the end of mortal time.” She raised her face and gazed at him with alchemical eyes. “Of all your many masks, this is the most grotesque.”

I slipped my hand out of her own. “I’m sorry, miss, but you have me confused with another.”

At this she scowled and writhed with rising. “An imposture? How very vile. We do not take kindly to such trickery, for we are weary with waiting, waiting. How you’ve come to impersonate His aura I cannot comprehend, for this mask is authentic in its way. Let me scald it with my wrath.”

She raised a hand and made some kind of sign unto the stars, and then she sliced one talon through her lip. I beheld the blood that bubbled from the wound as the creature leaned toward me and pressed her mouth against mine own. I drank her unholy elixir as she spoke an alien and unfathomable language that leaked into my mouth as swallowed bile. I watched her back away from me, not understanding the shadow that encased her, that hard unyielding surface of gloom. Starlight extinguished and the air stifled all about me. I walked toward the surface of rigid shadow and collided with a barrier of smooth glass. I leaned against that incomprehensible wall as the floor on which I trembled began to tip and threaten sane balance. Aware of sudden presence, I looked upward through the lean neck of the container in which I insanely found myself. A dark feminine face peered at me from above, and then its mammoth mouth moved with evocation as it weaved a wicked language into my rancid atmosphere. I watched, helplessly, as that siren orifice wrapped over my container’s opening and sucked.

IV

I glanced at the cinders in your burnished eyes and sensed the acidic wretchedness that burned the brain of a forgotten goddess. Those embers in your eyes were gold and orange, yet dull of hue like the mauve and ruddy porphyry with which your sarcophagus had been constructed. Had it always existed, your dwelling of anticipated death? Or did you have it built when, in vision, you beheld the end of your apprehensive adoration? It cannot be an edifice erected for One of Eternal Glory, for it is a place that reeks of extinction and expired dreams. There had been violation here, I sensed, for in your bowl that once held precious gems there was naught but dust and filigree of web. Your mouth was dry, no longer nourished by rich liquid sacrifice.

Your whispered legend had been discovered in one rare and ancient tome that I had located in a hushed shop in Innsmouth. That seaport reminded me of your legend, a thing of past magnificence and potency that was now mostly dormant yet contained a promise of resuscitated splendor. The air of Innsmouth reeked almost as sourly as the dead air of your catacomb; but whereas your sphere was one of utter silence, Innsmouth seemed never at rest—there was constant sound and movement. My eyes were always returning to the sea and its restlessness, to its waves that wrecked themselves on rocks and against rotting piers. My eyes were entranced by an agitation in the black clouds that crawled in the darkened sky, those clouds that shaped themselves suggestively. My ears could hear the sharp cry of gulls that soared above the agitated water, and I thought that I could detect, just below that ordinary noise, an unnatural ululation that might have been but a tissue of entranced hallucination. I stood in that Innsmouth shop, among fossilized memories, and touched the cool pages of an elder volume; and I was allowed to purchase that book, and I wrapped it inside my coat as I stalked the quays beneath the winged gulls and wisps of black clouds.

I sat in the yellow glow of my lantern, in my attic study, and tried to read the book; yet it was difficult to follow the lettering that would not be still beneath my moving hand. It is not easy to read faded dark etchings that subtly creep across a page as if to escape one's touch, like insects that cannot tolerate the violation of hot human hands. Perversely, I placed my fingers over one section of rapacious ink, that ink that was a hungry

blackness that did not move away but rather lifted so as to meet my flesh. Ah, what tricks may be played by the etchings of a potent wizard. How adoringly his quill spilled into wordage the story of your legend. You were a rare dream that he almost fancied was his personal perversion, his delirium of diabolic ecstasy. He saw you as some mystic whore crowned with jeweled stars, and he ached to sip the nectar of your pomegranate mouth, misunderstanding the dye with which your lips were stained. Although much mistaken of your nature, he saw enough of your hidden essence that it beguiled his imagination and debauched his dreaming. He wrote of you as one intoxicated—and that psychic inebriation exists still in his monstrous text, that sentient transcript that frolicked before my eyes and realized my hand. Oh, that wizard ink! It slipped inside my pores and spilled inside my veins, evoking you so absolutely that I beheld the foliage that screened your ancient tomb. I dreamed the slaughter within that tomb with which your ghastliness was celebrated, and I tasted gore upon my teeth. When I awakened from strange reverie I found that I had bit into my tongue and imbibed my blood—and yet it did not taste like something of mine own.

How rare, to have discovered one extraordinary testimony of your legend, recorded by the sorcerer who dreamed you. Although I am no mage, I penned a private grimoire of my own as images were revealed to me in midnight lunacy. I etched your symbols as they were burned into my brain by acidic vision, and I formed the fantastic map that showed me the way to your porphyry tomb. I hacked my way through growth and found your dwelling, and I performed the secret task by which your tomb was opened. I descended the dusty steps that led to where you reclined within your casket as an eikon of ebon stone that had been smoothed by the kisses of your acolytes. I found the ritual dagger, and although its blade was dull I used it with precision; for the sight of your empty bowl was pitiful, and the only gems I owned were my eyes, one of which I dexterously removed so as to place it in your basin. I set it there, inside that sad little space, as an outside wind moaned sorrowfully. But I was happy to hear your whispered sound, the faint vibration that slipped from your firm stone mouth. I felt that sibilant resonance touch my lips, those mortal petals that parted so as to pronounce your name; and, oh, the wonder that I knew, to see the hollow

pits that were your eyes begin to smoke, to glow like cinders of some reanimated force.

The cinders in your eyes are gold and orange, and they are no longer dull like unto the mauve and ruddy porphyry of your nameless tomb. Your lips are black and dry, but not for long—for I shall tilt to you and press my mouth to thine, my mouth that I have split with the rough blade of a ritual dagger. And as I kiss you I will whisper again your name, the sound of which will echo inside your tomb, that forgotten zone where you will claim me as thy newest feast.

V

I want to kiss you, devil boy.

It's true, I have not bothered to see you since that strange yellow day. I've been preoccupied with that house on Benefit Street, and the area adjacent to it. You never mentioned that wooded plot of land, so I suspect you haven't really investigated the neighborhood of the shunned house. You have been excited by its legend—but it's just a story for you, not something that dwells and dreams in haunted Providence. I was mesmerized as you spoke of it, that day of yellow light when you playfully described it. I could not resist going to prowl through it after we had shared our little meal. Everyone in the café on College Hill was talking about the yellow day, and we never did discover any explanation for the phenomenon. Do you remember the shadows of clouds on the pavement as we strolled to our rendezvous? Have you ever witnessed such shadows of clouds before? I've been aware of shifting light, of brightness darkening into shade as clouds obscured the sun; but this was different, this display we witnessed as it crept before us on the wide pale pavement—those unnerving and grotesque silhouettes of that which skulked across the sky as we inhaled the perfumed air of the yellow day. Do you remember how nervous it made you, to watch those shadows play across the surface of my eyes, so that the substance of my eyes mutated into something new and strange, enhanced by alien

element? I laughed at you then, my child, and pulled you to me so that you could kiss my cloudy eyes.

It was the yellow light that made you think of the yellow house and its unfathomable aura. You had mentioned it, briefly, once or twice; but on this occasion you expounded on its history and spoke acutely of its place in the history of spectral Providence. You mentioned that Poe had often walked past it on his way to court Mrs. Whitman, or as he ventured to dream in this burying ground to which I have spirited you. Perhaps Poe sat on this very oblong slab on which we are posited. You mentioned the history of that yellow house and told the tale of how two gentlemen entered into it so as to pierce its mystery, with only one of them emerging alive and semi-sane. They had entered the residence with curious scientific expectation, but they were unnerved by the patches of mould that took on the most suggestive of shapes (perhaps like unto the curious clouds that followed us across the pavement on that yellow day). They worked at their task as their health was sapped by the titan thing that burrowed beneath the yellow house, that dead yet dreaming enigma. How enticing your voice sounded as you spoke of it, and how impossible it was for me to resist walking down College Hill after our tête-à-tête, so as to touch my hand to the yellow timber of the lower section of the house on Benefit Street. I did indeed sense something—yet it didn't surge from the house itself but rather from the adjacent wooded vicinity. I pointed to the little spot and asked you about it, but you merely shrugged and then followed me to the black fence, behind which rose a wooded hillside. I had been instantly drawn to it because woodland had always been a kind of asylum for me from the world of men. And so I stepped through the gate of the black iron fence, onto a small patio of brick. I glanced at the growths of shrub, their large leaves, waving to me in the yellow light of that uncanny day. I saw the pathway of large flat stones, on which I walked to seven lengths of stone steps that took me deeper into the shady area. I glanced beyond my left-hand side, over a wooden fence and into the backyard of the shunned house; and I smiled at the nebulous shadow on the ground there, wishing I could dance in that darkness and drink its essence. You did not want to pause and walked ahead of me, to where the stone steps were replaced by three tilted steps of hoary wood. The pathway curved before us, and we walked upon its sod into a small grove wherein a thick old tree awaited us. How dim the place suddenly

seemed, mutely tainted by the jaundiced light of the yellow day; and yet we noticed, at the same time, that other hint of illumination—the phosphorescent growth of mould that blighted the trunk of the ancient tree. How curious, the outline of that fungal stain that seemed to form a monstrous face from which infinitesimal threads of mist emanated. Something in the shape of that pale fungus drew me to it, and as I investigated its texture with the eyes that you had kissed an aroma arose, and I was intoxicated. And the tendrils of mist embraced my nostrils and entered into them, so that I could taste that of which they were composed. And that taste spread to the roof of my mouth, and down my length of tongue, to my hot throbbing throat. I laughed as I devoured. I think it was the sound of my laughter that made you flee.

But you cannot keep from me, sweet friend, for you have found me on this foggy day in Providence, and taken my hand, and kissed my eyes. I have passed my fingers through your black hair, to the two raised tufts that you had stained crimson and shaped so as to resemble horns. But oh, my love, I will show you something far more satanic than your pose. Do you see it there on the corner of my mouth, one little slice of fungi that awaits you? Come, press your lips to mine and let my tongue guide yours to that little shred of doom, and then swallow it and join me in my ecstasy of horror.

I want to kiss you, one last time.

VI

We sat, we writers, around our table, satisfied by our Italian meal, lingering over ice cream and coffee. Howard, our eldest member, had wanted us to gather at Angelo's on Federal Hill, his favorite restaurant; he loved it because it had been in business since 1924, and thus was part of the past era that so mesmerized him and with which he was in love. Having happily devoured his three dishes of ice cream, Howie rose to his feet to toast us with his coffee cup and then pulled out a folded sheet of paper.

“My new prose-poem,” he announced, “for the little book that I am writing for Larry, whom some of you know. I call this new piece ‘Cinctured by Bright Winds,’ and it is based on a dream that I recently suffered. I say ‘suffered’ because this dream was dark and potent with danger, and yet one could not call it nightmare because there was nothing in it that was solid or clearly seen. It was all daemonic hint, swaying shadow and muted sound that encircled me like some phantom enclosure. It felt almost like dark vision, this dream, like creeping fate that crawled to me, full of promise and presage. Here is my little expression of it.”

Howie’s voice, when he talked, was very high-pitched, almost comically so; but when he read his work that voice transformed and deepened in tone, and its effect was amazing. His voice became musical and perfectly matched the lyricism of his prose. I listened, entranced, and when again I brought the coffee cup to my mouth its liquid was cold. A new party of people entered the establishment, holding the door open for each other so that a vigorous wind blew in from the street and tossed some of our paper napkins onto the floor. That wind was like a herald and we obeyed, pulling out our wallets and piling bills with which to pay our fare. And then we rose as one and followed Howard out onto Atwells Avenue, into the wind and below the street lights.

Compelled to lead the way, I walked past Howie and down the avenue, suddenly turning into an alley and paying no heed to the protests of my fellows. Old Howie was suddenly beside me and pressing his hand onto my shoulder. “Surely you’ve been down here before,” I told him, “what with your endless night-time explorations of this old town. No? That surprises me, you having lived in Providence for most of your long life. This Little Italy district has many old world charms, and here is one of them.” I stopped before a door that seemed composed of very old wood, the frame of which was slightly askew, like something one may find in a funhouse. “Come, gentlemen, follow me and meet our local Strega.”

I led the way across the threshold and into the crowded showroom, where fantastic things were on display. The place was lit by lantern light, and as I turned to wink at Howard I saw that his white hair, which had become disheveled by his running of nervous hands through it, almost glowed with the effect of the light behind it. The elderly fellow was in need of a haircut, and three lengthy strands of hair stood erect, making it look as

though the poet was wearing a triple crown composed of pallid metal. I could not comprehend the look of distaste that was evident on his lean face.

“I thought you would adore this place,” I scolded him. “Your beloved past is here, in every corner.”

He sneered. “I see little more than squalor. Filth is everywhere. Look at those wisps of web. And there is a peculiar smell, like stale patchouli oil. Very unpleasant, this place.”

“It’s your racial snobbishness raising its snout again, that is all. Much as you adore Italian cuisine, you have always spoken of Italy’s people as a squalid race, dark and dirty. It’s too absurd; they are such beautiful creatures.” And then I espied the tiny *vecchia signora* who observed us from one corner of the room. She smiled, as if intuiting that she belied my expression of her race as *beauteous*—for she was not pretty, being deformed by incredible age and ugliness. Howard, who seemed to share Wilde’s distaste for unsightly humans, turned away and gazed at an object that hung upon one wall. I squinted at him, curious about the sudden noise that had erupted from his throat. I stepped to him and followed his upward gaze to the *crux ansata* that had been fastened to the wall.

La Strega crept beside me and spoke with raspy voice. “It was discovered in one very old church, perhaps you remember the story of what was found there just before its demolition in 1992? Perhaps the signore are familiar with the story, eh?”

“I am,” piped Howard, “from personal investigation. Some of you may remember my long poem, ‘Dark Church on Federal Hill.’ It was about that place, and what I found on the night I stole into it. I saw many queer things, some of which I have happily forgotten. But I’ve not forgotten that.” He pointed to the ankh. “It seemed preposterous, that an ancient Egyptian symbol of Life should be there, in that place that felt so deceased—and diseased. Gawd, the dry still air, like that of a tomb, and the dirt and darkness everywhere! Yah, the morbid art on the sooty panes of the apsidal windows!”

“Captivating darkness,” the ancient woman said, nodding her head, “especially in the upper reaches, that troubled lair. Did you climb the spiral staircase? To the tower chamber? Can you recall the air in that small room—its hot-house vapor, like reptile’s breath? Aha! The sinister light that trembles in your eyes as you see into your past. Did you run then, down the

staircase and through the nave? Had you noticed the blackened panes of the large windows, whereon saints should have been displayed? With what had those windows been stained? Not soot merely. Methinks they had been touched by outer gloom and the being that fumbled therein. Portions of those windows have been pilfered by things that walk like men. Some of the windows were shattered just before the demolition. Their sooty shards have an allure for some who know the old and secret ways. There are some with a talent to raise the spectre of that foreboding church with sound and movement. Did you sense that spectre as you stood within that place? Most say that it has fled, to the stars and beyond them. Some whisper that it left a certain monstrous aftermath, an eidolon of blemish and soot that can be conjured.”

We all listened, entranced. Her English, although heavily accented, was good and easily understood. Yet there was something truly alien caught within the shadows of her eyes. With seemingly evil intent, those eyes peered to something directly above us. I raised my face to the instrument that hung over us from where it had been fastened to the ceiling. It resembled a curious wind chime composed of silver threads and dark shards of blackened glass. La Strega raised her withered hand and moved its crooked fingers, and the display above us began to sway, to touch its components so that a musical sound filtered down like dust. It was an awful noise, a clamor that seemed to splinter my brain and pierce my mind with monstrous visions of unholy things. I began to sense the cosmic wind that formulated and gradually surrounded us. I tasted that exhalation’s reptilian essence. I could almost see that coil of alien air as it encased us within its hot whirling walls.

Old Howard leaned into my embrace and shuddered. He pressed his shocking face to mine so that I could taste his tears of terror. His slobbering mouth stained my cheek as he began to yell. “Rifts in time, and dead things that stalk between the stars. Black suns that call to us, shimmering with evil intent like those shards above us. See, Frank, see! The hungry stars and dead moons call us! They would pull us to other worlds, unfathomable galaxies, wherein to be mortal is to be a thing of naught. Dark dimensions in the ultimate void! Cold, cold upon our hot mortal eyes. Avatar of Nyarlathotep, slinking between dimensions and leaving behind a wretched odor of madness and memory. It burns inside my brain—burns like alien

ice!” And then the old man screamed and fell into my embrace. I held on to him with one arm, one arm that seemed to contain a strength that was more than human. Shrieking, I reached with my free hand for the nearest object, a statuette that resembled Anubis, made of smooth and heavy jade. I hurled the thing at the chimes above us, then used my hands to cover Howard’s eyes as particles of broken glass and metal rained downward. The walls of bright sentient wind melted from us, and my eyes gradually adjusted to the candlelight of the quiet room. The hag was nowhere to be seen, and my other companions had fled into the night. Heavily, my friend slumped in my embrace. I called his name as I set his weighty form onto the floor; but there came no reply, for my friend was dead.

VII

I had reclined onto the tabletop tomb of John Merritt within St. John’s hidden churchyard and contemplated the past. Not ordinary history, but the occult past of bewitching Providence. An obscure chronicle, to be certain. Even John Merritt was rumored, in vague records, to have been acquainted with the Providence warlock, Joseph Curwen, in the late 1740’s. I thought about these things as I stretched my limbs on the antique tomb in chill October sunlight. I listened to the immortal wind to see if I could detect any echo from that past to which I felt so queerly connected. A call came to me, but it was the city itself that summoned my soul; and so I pushed off the tomb and found my way to Benefit Street, walking slowly past the grand houses until I came to the yellow house from which I always sensed a kind of emanation. As I stood gazing at the house it seemed the wind beyond me became musical, and then I realized that the sound was not the wind at all but rather the playing of some instrument nearby. Slowly, I strolled beyond the house, to the small memorial park adjacent to it, and saw the incredible sight. Someone sat upon a stool and played a viol. The goat mask that the figure wore was most unusual, for its texture seemed to blend smoothly with the person’s human flesh, and the black eyes behind the mask blinked wickedly as they beheld me. I was almost overwhelmed with strange

compulsion, with an ache to float to the figure and drink the elixir of its breath. I did not move, I barely took in air; and as I stood there, breathless and transfixed, the area around the figure darkened, uncannily, until I could just make out the figure's silhouette in a realm of bizarre shadow.

The lanes of Providence called to me once more. I turned away from shadow and continued down the sunlit sidewalk, crossing Benefit as I approach Thomas Street, where I stopped for some few moments to admire the majestic steeple of the First Baptist Church. I then walked down to the Fleur-de-Lys Building, which had been so weirdly designed by Edmund R. Willson and erected in 1886. The fantastic façade of the building always made me grin, although I knew its really extraordinary aspect dwelt within, among artistic clutter. I had been renting an upper studio, but as I turned my key and pushed open its wide door, I knew that I didn't want to ascend the stairs. Looking up that stairway and seeing the lean antique doors of the hallways always gave me a thrill, for here the past seemed to live in an audacious way, defiantly. I had never entered a building where time not only stopped but seemed transformed, as it was within the Fleur-de-Lys. Even the shadows of the place struck one as unusual and formed of a dissimilar kind of darkness than that which was ordinary.

I entered the large main studio, with its tables packed with implements and relics of artistic expression. I glanced around at the pale painted walls, the old woodwork and red hearth, the hanging florescent lights—the mixture of bright plastic modernity and shadowed past. The tarnished upright mirror that stood near to the hearth had not been there previously. The soft sunlight that seeped into the room from the windows caught the gilt of the mirror's frame in a magnificent manner, so that the dusky glass encased within it seemed hallowed by golden splendor. I walked toward the mirror and stopped two feet from it. My image oppressed me with misery. The reflected room itself looked different, duskier and older—turning the mirrored image into a portrait of the past, the one flaw of which was my modern self. I sneered at the ridiculous attire with which my black flesh was clothed. It was only in my facial features that I seemed to behold my ancientness of heritage. I was overwhelmed with sudden and passionate desire, a longing to escape bright modernity and sink into an elder era. I half fancied that the wind was speaking to me; and then I knew that it was not the wind at all but rather an exquisitely low and distant musical note,

prolonged and increasing in crescendo. As the sound swelled, the reflected room within the mirror became animated with swarming shadow. I felt such kindred with that growing blackness. Nonchalantly, I removed my clothing so that my reflection was more in keeping with the imagery before me. And then all light extinguished within the spacious studio room and its echoed semblance in the mirror. Only the golden arch remained, shimmering before me like some wraithlike gateway.

I began to move toward the golden arch but tripped over one of my discarded shoes. Hissing at the disturbance of my balance, I raised my black hand so that it would touch the mirror and thus break my fall. But my fingers did not meet a cold and unyielding surface of polished glass within its great gilded frame, for there was nothing within that frame except a void of darkness into which I faltered. For one moment I was convulsed with confused fear, not understanding my fate, thinking I was being hurled into some dream-like state. Perhaps this is a dream into which I have fallen, swiftly and silently. I exist in blackness, with no hint of light except, occasionally, a ghost-like orb that may be a memory of the moon. Sometimes I rest, lulled by a cosmic suggestion of sound that may be an exquisitely low and infinitely distant musical note. But mostly I seep and whirl, gracefully and meaningless, within the obscurity that is my residence of horror.

VIII

She gazed inward and saw murky shifting shapes, apparitions that, churning, laced her soul with wonder. Something in the semblance of the phantoms, in the way they stretched and seethed, awakened a kind of unholy appetite deep within her. She ached to suck them into her with hungry mouth, suck them deeply so that they wheeled around her heart and taught that organ spectral palpitation. She wanted to be a thing of smoke, like unto these things she envisioned, so as to flit among the tombstones and seep through the trunks of ancient trees. Thus she lifted her arms to humming wind and danced upon the graveyard ground, hoping that she

would be lifted into the buzzing air; and then she shrieked with laughter as, instead, she fell into a shallow indentation in the earth, falling until her face was buried in the pit of upturned sod, where she tasted dirt and darkness. Although she could not breathe, she moved deeper into the earth's embrace, and when at last she felt very far from the living, she turned over and stretched so that worms could caress her fingers. It pleased her to know that she was not alone; for her phantoms had descended with her, and touched her with their melting hands, and clawed away the ground beneath her so that she sank further into the lonesome place. And as she sank, she listened to her throbbing heartbeat as it became unearthly, as if her mortal heart had found some further deceleration, an elder palpitation that pulsed behind her eyes and taught them to envision an obscure realm where dreams are grown diseased and fed her keen ennui with the world of living things. That sickness unto death encased her like some acidic cocoon in which she disintegrated, and from which she emerged as phantom particles that lifted toward the abyss of night. Above ground, she reassembled as a quasi-mortal fiend, and with daemoniac eyes she found, when scanning heaven, one hellish star; but she did not know the name of that blood-hued sphere, and so she could not call to it and lure it from its place among clouds. Thus she clawed into her transformed face and dug out what remained of fleshy eyes, those chilly jewels that she hurled into heaven so that they could shine beside the daemon star. Blind, she reached out to buzzing wind, in which she detected subtle articulation; and her outstretched hands were taken by the unsubstantial hands of her phantoms, those devils that kissed her hand with spooky mouth as they freed her, at last, from all vestiges of humanity and danced with her into wraithlike nothingness.

IX

It towered, the twisted entity, above the ground-mist that enveloped me as I swept into that hollow of old oaks. I confess that it felt strange, knowing once again the uncanny consciousness that I had experienced in youth; for I had put childish things behind me, had become absorbed in my

studies at Harvard and Miskatonic, had done my best to abolish the farm boy from Dunwich. Yet here I was, an adult, standing before the grotesque oak that had bewitched me with fear and marvel as a child. It enchanted me still, with its incredible height and extensions of menacing branches that spread out as though they were hunting for some nourishing prey to pluck from the ground. My sister had mocked my sense of peril whenever we approached that tree on our way to our altar in the hollow; yet now I was returned to Dunwich, because Elana's corpse had been found tangled among the tall branches of that old oak.

The grey mist was the same that I had known when I was young, and its reek was an odor that had found me in dream no matter how far I had travelled from this land. There are aromas that can be found in Dunwich only—or perhaps we who are bred here have developed uncommon senses with which to detect the region's aberrant quality. Those perceptions awakened now, as I walked into the hollow's depths and found the megalithic site that had been my boyhood haunt. It had enchanted me then—and bewitched me still, the circle of tall stone pillars that bespoke of incredible age and mystery. There was something unearthly in the way the stones had been assembled, and the sight of them now touched my eyes with a chilly wonder that seeped to my brain and touched it with frigid reminiscence. I saw again the rough-hewn altar stone within that monolithic circle, and could smell the herbage, rank and wild, that clung to the sinister slab. My liquid eyes peeped through mists of time and saw the body that reclined on that dank stone, and I knew that it was I. I felt, again, that other chaff, those weeds of delirium that I thought I had expunged by leaving Dunwich and dwelling among ordinary folk. But no—it clung to my skull and infected my brain, and I knew that it was the immortal madness that is a Dunwich legacy.

Suddenly, I recalled the one infiltration of that familial folly when I was at Miskatonic. Elana had come to visit me, on a whim, her first venture out of Dunwich Village. I had ushered her into an abandoned science room, so as to hide her deformity from the other students; for my sister wore the fleshy remnants with which some of our kindred were cursed, a kind of swarthy texture to the skin that did not look natural to human kind and that led to talk of witch-blood and traffic with strange forest presences. Ah, the

cruelty I saw in her slanted ochre eyes; oh, her nasty laughter at my rush to sequester her from notice.

“Ye’ve done well, my brother,” she cooed, “hiding your ancestry from yon students. You’ve refined your outward self, and your way of speaking is so nice. Do any of ‘em know that ye were squeezed from a filthy Dunwich womb? Peculiar, I call it, how so many young village lads are lured to Miskatonic University. I thought I recognized one other on my way through the square. Nigh, I heard they has some books here, like the ones grand dad borrowed from the Whateley farmhouse right afore ye Horror. Remember that one book, how we used to sneak it down and study its queer diagrams until mater found us with it and hurled it into ye hearth? Ma didn’t know about my notes, did she? Nar! Never caught me digging sigils in farmyard dirt. Now then, what’s the matter, my brother? Why are you so pale, and your eyes so fevered? Got one of your headaches? Come, rest ye on this metal table, here, and let me hold your head in my soft hands. Look, a little knife. What is that ye call it, a scalpel? A science tool? Hell, we could have used it in the hollow, when I rested ye on that altar and etched diagrams into your hide with mama’s dull kitchen knife. Come, stretch on this chilly metal and rest your head, Elias.”

Her words were ever soothing. One could resist her nothing. I climbed onto the table and shut my eyes as my ears drank the sweetness of her voice. I was almost unaware of the sharpness that began to etch schema into my skin.

Memory grew dull and faded as I regained my sense of place beneath the hollow’s trees. Unaware, I had walked to that altar stone and reclined upon it. I fancied that I could smell again the alchemical fragrance of incense and occult candles that Elana and I had burned as part of unholy rite. As if in dream, I could remember her chanted phrases, copied from that olden tome and memorized. I looked, and saw the smoke of candle and incense that mingled with the grey ground-mist; and then I saw the banks of other emission, the thousand smokes that heralded the coming of the Nameless One whom we adored with sacrament. It filtered to us, the One who wore the mask of fire, ushered by hazy hooded phantoms that surrounded the altar and pressed their ashy kisses onto my exposed flesh. I beheld an additional phantom, a sorry spectre that stood apart from the others, clothed in cloud and gloom. Its contours were familiar.

I think I groaned a little as this new horror drifted to me and lifted its ritual dagger. I quivered as that implement was lowered to my lips, which kissed it. My eyes brimmed with tears as proverbial ritual was uttered on the wind, as sigils were etched onto my eyes. Oh, her odd beloved face. Behind her, the Nameless One reached past the starry voids and caught one strange grey world, a sphere of which Elana and I had learned about in some prehistoric text. The blade's point worked on me still, and I could feel my streams of liquid mortality seep from their newborn slits and mingle with the ashy remnants of phantasmal kisses.

My human hands reached out. One caught my sister's hair, and the other was clutched by her fiendish hand. Aided by her alchemy, I floated from the altar, into her embrace, and we danced as the earth beneath us crumbled into dust that was scattered as cosmic waste. Chortling, we stepped beyond the stars, guided by a Nameless One, past space and time, to hoary Yuggoth, where we buzzed in ecstasy among immortal fungi.

X

"I longed to learn the songs the demons sing as they swoop between the stars, or hear the voices of the olden gods as they whisper their secrets to the echoing void. I yearned to know the terrors of the grave; the kiss of maggots on my tongue, the cold caress of a rotting shroud upon my body. I thirsted for the knowledge that lies in the pits of mummied eyes, and burned for wisdom known only to the worm."

--Robert Bloch, *The Shambler from the Stars*

You would think, weird author that I am, that I would merrily dwell on my day of happy death. Yet am I complacent. Because as I sit upon this boulder beside the Seekonk River, as I listen to the wind whistle among the leaves of spreading trees, I try to imagine your final days at Butler. Were you locked inside a little room, and were there bars on the window? It was ninety years ago, and I shudder to think of what you may have suffered. Yes, I love the macabre, but it is fantasy. Reality is the authentic horror. You

were boxed inside your little room, and then you were planted in your little box at Swan Point. I won't abide such boxes. Teach me not the mundane terrors of the grave. I've known geeks who feasted on maggots, and I was not impressed. I've slept with mummies and found their conversation lacking. No, no. I will not slumber 'neath the sod.

Do you remember the legend of the Outsider, the fellow who lived beneath the earth? Can you recall how he tried to escape the crumbling corridors of his palace and creep into the terrible forest beyond his buried edifice? That realm and its preternatural shadow was not for him. Instead, aching, he climbed the stairless cylinder of rock, upward to what he thought would be "the light." What he found, after his folly among the dancing folk who fled him, was the night, and its illuminations. His friends became the happy ghouls who mock mortality. I am such a fiend, and I will ride the wind. Do not plant me in some box, do not pack my ashes into a jug. Sprinkle me into the wind that rushes over this Seekonk River, and let me flow on water and in gale.

Until then, I will sing the songs of horror and kiss your flesh with chilly lips. I will churn the substance of your brain with language that sighs of secret things. I will evoke the dark wonder that thrilled the prophet of Providence, who is my midnight Muse. Selah.

This Splendor of the Goat

I

The young woman knelt in the area half-way up the mountain and smoothed its surface of rock with pale hands. The mountain stone was as white as polished limestone, and its shiny façade reflected the bright afternoon light. Turning, she looked down into the valley and smiled. They would not follow her here, and so she could escape for a little while their queries and queer glances. Laughing, she lifted her hands to the sun and clapped, and then she rose upon her feet and looked above her at the magnificent arched peaks that resembled two wings on the back of some daemon. Playfully, she studied her shadow on the rocky surface and shaped her arms so that her silhouette resembled, however feebly, the appearance of Mount Selta. Happily, she glanced around her, until her sight fastened on the nearby bust that had been sculpted from a large rock. She went to it and admired the skill with which the face and torso had been fashioned. The sun-lit features were as grotesque as any she had seen in Sesqua Town, except that here they wore a slight difference from that of the children of the valley; for their Sesquan faces were a bizarre combination of frog and wolf, whereas this sinister countenance was distinctly goat-like.

Perhaps this was meant to be a portrait of Pan, and that idea inspired the woman to begin to whistle a strange and lively tune. Once more, she raised her hands and began to clap in rhythm to her song; and as she whistled she began to move her feet upon the silky white stone, in dance. She was but vaguely aware of her peculiar tune, and when she stopped one moment to listen to it she could not recall where she had learned it. No

matter, it fitted her mood precisely, and so she kept whistling it as she unbuttoned her blouse so that she could feel the delicious morning sun on her breasts. As she cavorted about the bust she examined it carefully and decided that there was something decidedly sensual in its expression. Stopping her gyrations, she knelt before the bust and touched her breasts against its baleful countenance. Vaguely, she became aware of the one who observed her.

Playing over the sculpture's hair with pale hands, she bent so as to kiss the creature's brow. Without turning she shouted, "I came here to be alone."

"Then you shouldn't be so pretty and so wanton. Good grief, prancing around with your tits hanging out! How could I resist watching? Anyway, you're invading my special haunt. This is where I come to think."

"What could possibly be on your mind, Arthur, that requires such a trek?" she asked as she turned and sat on the ground, not bothering to cover her nakedness.

"Memories, and expectations. What brings you here, Monique?"

"Oh, a momentary escape—from them. This is one of the few areas they seem to shun." She shrugged. "I get tired of the way they react to me, the way they're always watching me."

The young man laughed and knelt before her, glancing around. "So where's your friend?"

Monique frowned, confused. "What?"

"That dark naked guy who was dancing with you." Her frown deepened, her eyes narrowing in annoyance. "He was right over there, by that outcropping of rock."

She tilted to him and smoothed her brow with a pallid hand. "Your eyes are playing tricks, Arthur. We are here alone. There are no dancing naked men." Her laughter bubbled from her as she buttoned her blouse and got to her feet. "It's getting hot. Did you drive from town? No? Excellent, walk back with me. You can protect me from any dark naked gentlemen we may encounter."

They descended the steep mountain path, and Monique wondered again at the utter lack of vegetation on Selta. When at last they reached the valley floor, she looked up at the twin-peaked titan and sighed.

"She does look amazing, doesn't she?" Arthur commented. "Almost like some slumbering daemon that is just awaiting that special spectral

moment of wakefulness. Do you remember how Simon reacted when I found that large piece of rock that had rolled off Selta, and I took it home and sculpted a replication? ‘Meikle, this is not allowed,’ he barked, and then he took my piece and put it on display in Creighton’s antique shop. Did I ever tell you about the outlandish dreams I had as I was making that sculpture?”

“Dreams of what?”

The young man sucked in air. “Can’t tell you. Can’t remember. When I try to recall them all I see is a blur of hazy shapes inside my mind, like formless shadows in a mist. But I remember the ecstasy and horror those dreams inspired. Ah, the air grows sweet again. Funny, on the mountain the air is fresh and ordinary, as it is outside the valley. But down here it regains that cloying sweetness that takes some time to get used to. I like this little clump of woodland, there’s something calming about it.”

Yes, the woman thought, this was a restful place, and she was in no hurry to rush through it. But the woodland ended too soon, and they found themselves on barren, blighted ground. The air breathed in turned rank, and they tried not to inhale too vigorously as they stepped through tall patches of yellow grass, past trees that were twisted and diseased. “This reminds me of the Hungry Place,” Arthur muttered, “only ten times worse. Ugh!” Finally they came to the end of poisoned ground, to a rocky road that led toward Sesqua Town. The sun had risen higher and the day was warm. Arthur removed his shirt and used it to wipe the sweat from his taut torso. Smiling coquettishly at her friend, Monique removed her top as well, and then laughed as Arthur leaned to her and kissed one pert young breast. They wandered nonchalantly down the rocky road that took them to the main section of the small town, and the girl slipped on her blouse but did not bother to button it.

Monique looked at the old buildings, the wooden planks that formed the town’s sidewalks, and the few denizens who shuffled on those planks. “Do you remember the first time you looked upon this scene? You came from city life, too, didn’t you? I remember taking it all in and feeling that Sesqua Town was both charming and absurd. Somehow, I knew that I belonged here, almost that I had been summoned by the valley itself because of my predilection for occult things; and yet when I first arrived I

thought my visions of the valley had been drug-induced delusions. How did you learn of Sesqua Valley?”

“From a little cult I dabbled with,” Arthur answered. “Simon used to join us, and I was especially beguiled by his sorcery. He was impressed with my grasp of esoteric languages, so he brought me here and showed me some manuscripts in his tower library that he was pondering over. He’s such a freak. I could tell that he was hesitant to bring me to the valley, and yet he couldn’t contain a kind of enthralled pride in showing me some of its wonders. And then we had a little sexual episode, as part of a ritual, and I was hooked. The place haunted my dreams when I returned to the city, to such an extent that I sold my business and relocated here. Now I feel totally adopted.”

Monique looked past the downtown section, to the mammoth mansion that stood on a low hill just beyond. “Let’s go visit Leonidas. I want to look at your sculpture of Mount Selta. Oh, stop moaning. It’ll be fun. Leonidas is such an oddity.”

Arthur laughed. “That’s what is said of you, sweet thing.” He bent to kiss her cheek, and they walked past the storefronts and to the ascending road that took them to the enormous mansion. The upper rooms of the building were rented out to the few who were passing through the valley or staying for limited visits to Sesqua Town. The mansion’s lower portion mainly housed the fantastic antique and curio shop of Leonidas Creighton, an occultist originally from London.

“Ah, he’s burning dragon blood incense. I wonder if he has any tenants,” Monique whispered as they climbed the steps that led to the wide porch and front door. “I haven’t noticed any outsiders in town.” A little bell sounded as she opened the door, and they strolled into a spacious smoky room. The room was arranged with rows of olden oak display tables on which fantastic items were carefully arranged, with taller cases filled with books or objets d’art. Wonderful paintings hanged on the walls, the most magnificent of which was a large oil of Mount Selta and the valley at sunset. The young woman followed her friend to a low table against one wall on which what looked like a collection of religious icons had been gathered.

“I caught her, didn’t I?” Arthur asked his friend as he examined the sculpture of white stone.

“You did indeed,” Monique agreed as she examined the sculpted image of Mount Selta, “but you’ve—enhanced—her image as well, given her a more sentient aura.”

“No,” her friend countered, “I’ve caught her during one of her restless moments, that’s all. Haven’t you ever gazed at her and seen the twin peaks bend just ever so slightly? It happens most in moonlight.” But his companion did not regard him; rather, she walked away, toward another table on which another artistic display had been assembled.

“Oh, look—it’s the kindred of our acquaintance on the mountain.”

A figure oozed toward them from one dusky corner in the room. “They are the work of Edith York.” Leonidas, sans his tall hat, regarded them somberly. Monique had never known the man to smile, and was rather glad of the fact; for this English gentleman seemed to have had his teeth filed into small perfectly shaped pearls with pointed tips. “What acquaintance on the mountain were you referring to? Have you been ascending Selta?”

Roguishly, Arthur chortled. “Aye, Leonidas, we have trespassed the sacred rock. We found a bust there, rather similar in style to some of these here. Perhaps it is the work of this Edith York.”

“Unlikely. Miss York is a child of the shadowland. She would never surmount that prohibited place. This bust of which you speak...”

“Is Edith York still among us, or has she returned to shadow?”

“She is entirely reclusive since the demise of her brother. I hope you’re not thinking of disturbing her.”

Arthur picked up one of the small sculpted satyrs and examined its countenance. “Are any of these for sale? This one could be one of the children, look at that ugly mug. No, for display only? Pity. But what the devil is that supposed to be?”

“That is called ‘Shub-Niggurath,’ one of her most complex works. As one gazes on it, one almost fancies that it moves, however subtly, that it expands and contracts like some sentient cloud.”

Monique touched the thing with timid hand. “Are those faces etched within it? Damn, it’s creepy, like a beast of vapor in which the visages of trapped souls cry out for mercy.”

“No,” Arthur countered, “not mercy. I mean, they are almost undistinguishable as faces, but they suggest, somehow, elation more than misery. A twisted kind of ecstasy, perhaps, but ecstasy nonetheless.”

“I believe they symbolize the thousand young of the black goat of the wood. Ah, you aren’t familiar with that particular legend. A minor Outer God, so legend says, and curiously wedded to terrestrial regions. I know very little about it, actually. Simon could tell you all there is to know.”

But Monique wasn’t listening. She was utterly captivated by the outré object, and by her sudden desire to become acquainted with the one who created it.

II

The bent, grotesque creature listened again to the timid knocking, and then used her cane to move through a corridor to the front door of her large old house, slightly alarmed that someone would be invading her privacy, which had never happened before. Slowly, she opened the door and observed the pretty girl who stood there, an outsider dressed in a gown of simple beige cotton, whose sleek black hair was tied up in a piece of white cloth. And there, held in one hand—the violet chapbook.

“Hello. Please pardon the intrusion. Are you Victoria York?”

“I am not.”

Monique paused, uncertain how to proceed, hoping that her real intention wasn’t obvious. “Oh. I found a copy of her book of poetry, and was hoping maybe I could get her to sign it.”

“My sister has escaped mortality,” was the woman’s queer reply.

“Ah. Are you Edith York, the sculptress? Leonidas showed me your pieces at the curio shop a few weeks ago.”

“Do you sculpt, Miss...? Would you care to come inside? I am just having my afternoon tea.”

“Oh! Thank you. I’m Monique Lambert. No, I’m not artistic at all.”

She followed the hunched woman into a comfortable sitting room, where a pot of tea and tray of cake slices sat on a low table before a petite settee. Edith motioned for Monique to sit, and then went to a sideboard and fetched a second tea cup. “What is it that you do, Miss Lambert?”

“I’m a daemonologist, studying with Simon,” the young woman answered as she watched the other pour tea into a cup. “Umm, that smells good. I was so impressed with your work on display. And I was struck with the goat-like features of some of your figurines. There’s a bust with similar features on Mount Selta, chiseled from a boulder. Could that possibly be your work?”

“My kind cannot trespass on mountain ground.”

Monique observed her new acquaintance as she sipped from her tea cup. “But you’re different from the others. Your features are more caprine than wolf-like. And your eyes, although silver, are tainted with a yellow element that the others lack.”

“You’re very observant. Yes, I have issued from a different pocket of shadow than most of the other children. I was a child when I arrived, and adopted by the York household. I think Simon set it all up, although I have never inquired. I tend to avoid that unpleasant beast.”

Politely, Monique laughed, and then quickly changed the subject. “There was one piece of your work that particularly intrigued me. Leonidas said it represented an entity called Shub-Niggurath. It’s piqued my curiosity.”

Edith raised her eyebrows in surprise. “Certainly one who studies unclean sprites with the beast of Sesqua Valley is aware of the Outer Gods. No? Has he never mentioned his passion for Nyarlathotep? Remarkable. What then is the nature of your studies with Simon?”

Monique set down her empty cup and leaned back onto the comfortable settee, setting the chapbook beside her on the cushion. “We study the elementals that are especial to the valley, and he has conjured some of the local imps to partake in our rituals, the strange dark folk and the frogs with human infant faces. He feels that my art has a rare potency that may enable me to summon creatures from secret pockets in the valley, fiends with which Simon is unfamiliar.”

“And have you?”

“I felt a presence in the woodland that affected me curiously. Strangely, I experienced the exact same sensation when I was studying your sculpture.”

“Ah, that is splendid. You have tasted the aura of the Black Goat of the Wood with a Thousand Young that lurks within our woodland. My sister

experienced that eidolon as well.” Edith motioned to a corner of the room where a life-size statue stood, the quality of which was so stunning that Monique could not resist rising and going to inspect the figure’s workmanship. “Of course, you know of Victoria’s passion for that particular Outer God from having read her poems. If, indeed, you have acquainted yourself with her work.”

There was a pregnant pause, and then Monique couldn’t help but snicker. “Damn, you’ve found me out. But of course you would. I’m not here because of Victoria. I spent the past few weeks learning more about you from the locals, and then an acquaintance gave me her extra copy of the chapbook. I’m here because of your sculpture of Shub-Niggurath and its spell over me. It’s triggered some uncanny instinct inside my soul.”

“Then you are here because of Victoria, in ways you may be unable to imagine. There are no accidents in Sesqua Valley, Miss Lambert. I advise you to read my sister’s poetry and let it instruct your dreaming.”

The young woman gazed at the statue. “She had an almost regal beauty.”

Edith nodded. “She was majestic in every way.”

Monique turned to her. “Are you entirely reclusive? I could come and visit, if you like, and help alleviate loneliness.”

For the first time, the ancient woman smiled. “One is never alone in Sesqua Valley, child. Especially my kind. I am visited by evening mist, wherein I hear the pleas of my shadow kindred to return to the realm of origin. I shall probably be returning before long. Not that I have much to do with those of the common swirl, being the fruit of unconventional pocket.”

“It’s so captivating when your kind speaks of the realm from which you came to our mortal clime, although none of you seem to have any clear memory of that other region.”

“Oh, I remember it—every bit.”

“Is it entirely different—from here?”

“As dream differs from the waking world. Don’t forget to take your chapbook, dear. You are quite lovely. Perhaps you’ll come again and sit for me.”

“I’d be honored, Miss York.” She went and took the chapbook from the elder creature’s hand and quietly exited the house. The day was mildly warm and bright, with a slight breeze that felt comforting as it played with

her strands of glossy hair. Removing her shoes, Monique walked past the center of Sesqua Town and stopped to lean against the mammoth sculpture of a sphinx, the stone of which was comfortably warm against her bare arms. Opening the chapbook, she squinted as the bright light of day was reflecting from its pages onto her eyes. Blinking, she began to consume poetry.

“What do you have there, Lambert?” asked a familiar voice.

“The poetry of Victoria Elizabeth York.”

“Ah, yes, a very curious case,” Simon Gregory Williams replied. “She vanished from the valley after an intriguing supernatural manifestation. Quite curious indeed. Her brother died a few years ago. Edith—now she’s rather interesting. She slipped into this mortal realm from an infant pocket of shadow and came to us in the form of a child. She’s not like others.”

“Her eyes are different—slightly.”

Simon raised an eyebrow. “You’ve encountered her?”

Monique nodded. “I’ve just come from visiting her. She wants me to sit for her, for a work of sculpture, I think.”

“You little nymph, how quite remarkable. Well, you’re as much an oddity as she is, thus it shouldn’t surprise one that you would find common ground.” He looked at the chapbook and frowned. “I lack that in my collection at the tower. You will donate it, of course.”

“Perhaps. What is this part here, these two lines in Greek?”

“Let me see,” he demanded, holding out his hand and clutching the offered booklet. “Hmm, yes; it’s an antique chant to the Black Goat of the Wood with a Thousand Young.” Monique jumped at the sudden sound of Simon’s loud voice declaiming old Greek, and the sun lit his silver eyes with greater intensity. It was always thus when he participated in some arcane rite, when his malformed mouth spoke magick. There was such vibrancy in his tone, and authority. It was at moments such as this that Monique knew she was dealing with a wizard of monumental potency. How strange that the sun seemed to darken at the continued sound of his chanting. A bestial thing howled from some distant place, and she detected an edge of cruelty in the sound—malice laced with unwholesome appetite. Simon, soaking it all in, grinned wickedly as he came to the end of his chanting. “Oh, that was fun. Whatever did we evoke, I wonder?”

“We evoked poetry—sublime poetry. Did you know her?”

“Victoria York? Not well. She and her brother were brought to the valley by mistake, by their foolish parents. They were very young, the children, and the boy was pathetic and spineless. He was an outsider to his very last day. They planted him yonder, in the Hungry Place. The mother was a child of shadow who had a sickening desire to remain mortal and so she left the valley and married. But she could not stay away, and eventually they came here to live. He lasted longer than any of us expected he would, but eventually he went mad and deserted the family.”

“And the mother?”

“Returned to shadow long ago. As for her eldest daughter—Victoria’s fate has remained an enigma, and little hunchbacked Edith has remained entirely reclusive, until obviously overpowered by your charms.”

The young woman pushed away from the sphinx and shielded her eyes. “I’m in need of shade. Wander the woodland with me, Simon, and help me to memorize those Greek lines from Miss York’s poem. I like the way they sounded. I like their potency.”

“Yes, they shimmer with influence, those words. How charming to see them work on you. You have disappointed me with being so unadventurous. Daemonology is a fascinating study, but a study of animism is mere theology unless put into some kind of practice. The best way to research and analyze devils is to evoke them, to feel their presence on one’s eyes, to drink their poison with one’s nostrils. That is the path toward which I have been guiding you.”

“Yes, you have, and your seduction has had its effect. Come on, I need to get out of this sunlight.”

She moved away without looking to see if Simon followed, and walked the distance until coming to a woodland path, onto which she stepped. The effect was instantaneous: the light that filtered through the trees and touched her eyes felt softer, and the air lost some of its cloying sweetness.

“You needn’t tramp so vigorously. One would think you were applying for some military, the way you march.”

“I’ve always liked this,” she said, stopping so as to touch a three-foot tall sculpture of a night-gaunt. “Is it true, Simon, that the woodland of Sesqua Valley connects with the woods of Dreamland, and that the gaunts filter thus into our realm?”

“The woodland here is pregnant with pockets to other realms, with which the wise do not tamper. I live in such a zone, which is why it is impossible for others to locate.”

“You lived there with the poet, Manly, until his strange disappearance. Take me there.”

“Don’t be absurd. I never allow mortals into my home.”

Monique leaned toward him and smoothed his cheek with the back of her hand. “I am no ordinary mortal.”

“Nay, do not touch me, nymph.”

“It’s what I do, Simon. It is my one trait of alchemy. I touch—and seduce.”

“You will remove your hand this instant. No, do not cover my eyes, Monique.”

Her laughter was a gay sound. “Ha, that’s the first time you’ve called me that. You see, you are already under my spell. Show me your abode, beast of the valley.”

“Come then, and follow me.”

She watched him walk a narrower path than the trail she had been following, and she wondered at the sudden sense of uncanny fear that gave her pause. Then he vanished from sight, and the idea of being alone where she stood aroused mild panic, and so she rushed after the beast, through the weird woods. When again she saw him, Simon had stopped to fondle the yellow flowers of the spreading branches of a tree.

“What a lovely laburnum,” Monique said as she joined Simon and fondled one of the hanging blooms. “Oh dear, the fragrance is rather heady—quite similar to the air of the valley. It catches in one’s throat.”

“So beautiful,” Simon intoned as he held the yellow flowers, “and so poisonous. I have a recorder made of laburnum wood, beautifully carved and with an amazing tone. I use it when I want to summon something particularly noxious.”

Monique blinked as she gazed about them. “The light is different here, weirdly diffused.”

“Everything is different here, nymph; we are near to the vicinity of the shadowed realm, to its barrier of dream. Manly wanted to remain close to home, and so he built his cabin in close proximity to the wraithlike rim. Come along, we’re almost there.”

They followed the narrow pathway together, side by side, and then she saw the little cabin in its charming setting. Monique could not suppress a gasp of joy as her eyes drank in the beauty of the scene, the remarkable loveliness of the tall trees that hanged their branches high above the small residence, the gorgeous beds of unfamiliar and fragrant flowers that surrounded the wooden structure.

“Welcome to my demesne,” the beast uttered.

The young woman fell onto the soft ground and sighed at how warm and wonderful the earth felt upon which she knelt. Like one intoxicated, she clawed into the soil and brought handfuls of it to her face and hair, rubbing the substance onto her flesh. She looked around and espied the object near to her, the sight of which made her cry out in amazement. Crawling on hands and knees to the bust, she embraced it, kissed it. “You have an amazing talent. There is a weird kind of sentience to your work, as if this were not a creation of stone at all but rather the fossilization of a once-living thing.”

“That is none of mine. My brother had the artistic hand.”

“Your brother? William Davis Manly? What a remarkable fellow he must have been. And I’ve seen the brother to this bust, on the mountain.”

“Whatever are you talking about?”

“There’s an identical replication of this work half-way up the mountain. Surely you’ve seen it.”

“We children of shadow never trespass onto the surface of Khroyd’hon.”

She stared at him, confused. “That is the dream name for Selta. No, I’ve never seen this other thing. But whatever it is, it’s not the work of William.”

“I tell you they’re identical, in every way. Obviously the work of the same artist. Manly visited Mount Selta, undoubtedly. Why can’t you walk on the mountain?”

“We do not. There are zones in the valley that disturbed us if we enter them. I’ve walked on the mountain twice, in aid of magick, and twice I have severely regretted it. I shall not repeat the error.” He watched as she petted the sculpted work, and something in the way she fondled it annoyed him. “But come, you wanted to see inside our home. Rise to your feet and follow me.”

The woman did as she was commanded and entered into the cabin with her host. The rooms were small and cluttered with fantastic debris. One wall was completely covered with over one-hundred flutes, all of curious design, which rested on fittings that had been fastened to the wall. Stepping into the bedroom, Monique sensed a powerful and morbid sorrow in the atmosphere, and using her arcane inclinations she deciphered that this was the place where the beast wept. She could smell his spilled tears on the pillow as she sat upon the bed. "More than brother."

"What's that you say?" Simon sat next to her, and his face wore an expression she had never seen it bear before. He did not protest as Monique took his hand and touched it to the pillow.

"Manly was more than brother to you. Your sorrow, your aching loneliness—my god, how you work to conceal that aspect of your psyche from everyone. You play at being cruel and monstrous, a masquerade that you have mastered. But it's mostly nothing more than a fiendish mask, a toy of personality with which you torment others. So as to shield the torment of your soul."

"I have no soul, nymph."

"Oh, Simon," she answered, placing one hand on his brow and the other at his chest, "you have more than most."

"Nay, do not touch..." But he could not continue, for she had discovered his secret, and now she touched it with her witchery, which he had enhanced through his instructing her in alchemy. He shuddered and shut his eyes, and soon the hands that touched him became, in fantasy, the hands of another, of one whom he had loved and lost.

Hours passed, and the wan moon lifted itself over the twin peaks of the white mountain. A nude figure emerged from the cabin and stretched in the pallid beams that filtered through branches onto ground. The young woman saw how one beam fell directly onto the goatish bust, the sight of which entranced her. She saw the small creatures that had surrounded that bust and were singing to it, the small frogs with faces of human infants. Going to them, she knelt before the sculpture, allowed the wee creatures to kiss her hands as she joined in their song. There came, from beneath the ground on which she knelt, a growing pounding, as if some gigantic heart beneath her had awakened with preternatural life. Monique listened as the freakish amphibians began to chant, in thin high voices, to something in the

woodland, some thing with which Monique had linked to, subconsciously. She listened to the strange and potent ululations that issued from the infant faces, listened until she had learned their language enough so that she could clearly speak it. Her voice, strong and clear, sang to the deity of woodland.

III

The small dark man emerged from the woodland and walked the road that led to Sesqua Town. Dressed in a suit of simple design, he held an undersized suitcase in one hand and a tote bag in the other. The morning sun shone in his dark eyes, those eyes that twinkled with humor as they glanced at the surrounding sights. He smiled at the quaint sight of the little business area, with its old establishments and sidewalks of wooden planks, and then turned to walk up a rising road that took him to a stately mansion of mammoth proportions. Climbing the steps of the porch, he found the front door open; and so he stepped through the threshold and entered a broad hallway, where interesting figures sat on antique walnut hall tables, and where fascinating paintings hanged on the walls. He stopped before one large painting and drank in its curious scene.

“Fantastic, isn’t it?” The dark man turned to acknowledge the youthful figure at his side. “It’s an original Pickman. There’s no signature, but the style is unmistakable, and he did other renditions of the same scene. Are you here to see the shop?”

“No, I’ve come to rent a room.”

“Ah, then I’ll introduce you to Leonidas. He’s just here in the show room.” He walked toward the double doors that, when opened, revealed a very large room that was crammed with antiques and curios. Two figures sat on an antique English oak settee made in 1780 and examined a large tome that rested on a beautiful hand-carved mahogany coffee table with white marble top. The taller of the two wrinkled his nose as if at an unpleasant odor as they took their eyes from the volume and regarded the dark man. “This fellow would like a room.”

Leonidas Creighton, arising and stepping to the stranger, was in his usual attire of black suit and caped black overcoat. His smooth white hair fell past his ears and just above his shoulders. Had he smiled, he would have revealed twin rows of serrated teeth; but Leonidas did not smile, for something in the nature of the outsider disconcerted him. "How long will you be staying?"

"That is undetermined." The dark man's voice was low and contained an undertone of buzzing that was quite peculiar; but the sound of it reminded Simon Gregory Williams of something he had encountered while investigating the mythic woodlands of Vermont, and he rose from the sofa and joined the others.

"I am Simon Williams," he said, bowing slightly, "and I welcome you to Sesqua Valley. Pray, what brings you to our little outpost?"

The dark man returned Simon's courteous bow. "Basil Scratch, your servant. I've come to dream visions of Khroyd'hon and enter, psychically, the valley's shadowed realm. Merely as an experiment, of course."

"You are quite informed about our realm," Simon responded, in a low voice that was laced with menace.

"I am a keen occultist. I know that you prefer to keep the valley's secrets to yourselves, and the mountain is indeed potent in shielding your dominion from most of the outside world; but there is another Outside realm, between the stars and beyond dimension, and in that place the valley is well known indeed."

Leonidas stepped a little nearer to the dark man and peered into the fellow's black eyes. "Ah, you are from Outside. Quite so. Yes, I see the void reflected in your orbs. This is a singular visitation. Cyrus, show Mr. Scratch to the Yellow Room. Your privacy, sir, is assured."

"My humble thanks." Basil bowed once more, and then followed Cyrus out of the room.

Simon's mouth curled into a snarl. "Pah! That fellow smells like a goat den. Most curious, this. We shall keep a sharp eye on this researcher of our homeland. Penetrate the shadowed realm? Preposterous!"

"Calm yourself. His trick is obvious."

"What trick is that?"

"Mr. Scratch was far too bold and outrageous in explaining his visit here. It was naught but theatrics, overly dramatic so as to conceal his

authentic reason for invading Sesqua Valley. Oh, he is without doubt an occultist of some kind—but he is much more than he lets on. We shall go along with his charade, and we will study his every move until we blast his mystery. Don't scowl so. This may prove quite entertaining."

"Were you one of us, you would not find it so. You like to see me squirm, Creighton. The idea of my authority being thwarted pleases your sick and fiendish mind."

The other fellow bowed. "Coming from the valley's supreme fiend, that is a delicious compliment. But you're mistaken. I have always supported you, however playful I may be at times, however wanton. True enough, I am and shall always be an outsider. But that is my lot wherever I have settled. I am quite singular, and my unnatural existence has had many dark moments. I have been condemned and hunted, thrown into prisons and pits, reviled and repulsed. It is only here that I have found the facility to exist as I am, in all my vileness; and that is why I have stayed here for eight decades, and will stay for eight more. The valley is now my home."

But Simon was too distracted to listen, abruptly turning from Leonidas and marching out of the mansion, into the light. The sky was clear except for some few beds of flocculent clouds that drifted over the valley. Simon raised his face to the sun and wondered why the day was already so hot; usually the weather in his valley was pleasant, not something one would be aware of because of extremities of coolness or warmth. He walked into town, stopping at the first building he came to and listening to the sound of laughter that came from inside. His curiosity aroused, Simon entered the artists' work studio and observed a small group of women and men who were at work on various projects. Sneering, Simon approached a shirtless fellow who was seated at a tall table and working on a sculpture.

"What is this, Meikle?"

The young man did not bother to look at Simon as he spoke, but continued his labors. "Amun Ra, in his ram personification. I've succeeded in making the horns especially wicked, don't you think?"

Simon scrutinized the sinister goat-like countenance that the sculpture wore. "What a curious physiognomy you've given it. However did you envision such a visage?"

"Oh, I copied it from the bust on the mountain. I made a lot of sketches, of course, but the real inspiration came from my dreams of the

thing.”

“Is this your sketchbook? Let me just glance through it.” Arthur aped nonchalance and returned to touching up his figurine as the beast studied pages on which the bust on Mount Selta had been sketched. Simon’s blood tickled in his inhuman veins. The sketched image was identical in every way to Manly’s goatish model. “Most peculiar.” He had not meant to speak the words aloud.

“Why is that?”

Simon shut the sketchbook and narrowed his eyes at the young artist. “I find it most peculiar that you outsiders invade the mountain’s exterior when you clearly understand that the area is proscribed. Your wanton behavior will not be tolerated.”

“Sod you, Simon. You have no power over me.”

Ah, what cruelty curled the beast’s malformed mouth. “Do I not?” Arthur watched as Simon’s eyes darkened with menace, and he felt his flesh prickle as the beast began to whisper phrases in a most peculiar language. The atmosphere in the room grew chilly and creepy, and the other artists stopped in their labors and observed the valley’s first-born shadow-spawn in fascination and fear. They watched, unmoving, as Arthur picked up a mallet from his table and began to smash his work of art violently, until it was merely a small pile of wreckage. Simon smiled at the rubble and then gently took the mallet from Arthur’s hand, kissed the implement and playfully tapped its leaden head against the young man’s brow. Then he tossed the tool onto the table and made his exit from the studio.

IV

Their bodies were intertwined within the circle of stones, their ritual of sex magick just reaching its climax. Together they screamed, and then they laughed and rested on their backs. Monique’s hand played through the mass of hair that decorated Arthur’s chest. “Is your beast soothed, my dear?” she queried.

The young man sneered. "Don't use that word. Damn him and his arrogance. It was one of my finest pieces. He knows that art is sacred here. I've never seen him so nasty." He paused and studied the girl's expression. "What?"

She frowned at him, as if to say she did not understand his implication. "You have a knowing look in your eyes."

She shook her head. "It's nothing. I think, perhaps, his fury is linked to the enigma of another local artist—the enigmatic William Davis Manly."

"Manly was a poet. There's a statue of him in the cemetery where outsiders are buried."

"He sculpted as well. I think he did the bust that we found on Selta."

Arthur shook his head. "The shadow-spawn don't go near the mountain."

"Simon's been there, twice; and William Davis Manly was no ordinary child of shadow. Maybe that's why so few people mention him. Perhaps he was banned in some way, banished from the valley."

"They'd hardly pay tribute to him with a statue, if that were so. Why do you laugh like that?"

"This is Sesqua Valley. Its denizens aren't going to make sense, Arthur."

But he wasn't listening to her, and she saw his face grow stern as he gazed past her, into the woodland. Monique turned to look into the moonlit timberland, and she saw the suggestion of a figure that was studying them, the silver eyes of which caught moonbeams. The humans did not move as the shadowed one stepped toward them.

"Your magick is ripe. I could scent the sex far off, and it inspired a pang of sorrow in the fact that I have never partaken of such primitive pleasure. I've come to sketch you, Monique." Edith showed them the sketchbook that she carried in one hand, and they observed the bulky shoulder bag that had been packed with artistic implements. "No, don't hunt for your clothes—you are charming just as you are." Without hesitation, the Sesquan set her things on the ground and began to remove her clothing. The humans watched, entranced, never having seen a child of shadow nude. "I am not, as I suggested to you, my dear, like others of the shadowed realm. I have more in common with the strange dark folk. You will notice that my feet are partially hoofed, and the fur covering my breasts and loins is sleek

and black. My kind almost never follow Simon into this mortal realm when he tempts us with his reed and sorcery. We prefer the mountain in her primitive dream-state, as majestic Khroyd'hon. We mingle with the dreams of slumbering Cthulhu, and howl in mockery with Nyarlathotep. We inhale the airy exhalation of that which is worshiped as Shub-Niggurath. Ia! The Black Goat of the Woods with a Thousand Young!"

As she spoke the ground beneath them began to pulse, and some dweller on the mountain bayed at moonlight. The entranced couple saw the mauve mist that began to issue from distant trees and collected as a miasmal entity that oozed toward them. They listened to Edith's murmured song, to the fantastic language of her litany, and watched as she picked up her sketchbook and drew a pencil from her bag. Edith's strange song turned coarse and became a cackle as she seemed to welcome the nude prancing figure who danced toward them out of the mist. The small dusky man with goatish facial features clapped his petite hands as he continued the song that Edith had been warbling. His voice was high and contained a quality of buzzing, and the frenzy of his clapping was so infectious that the mortals could not resist but rise and join him in satanic frolic.

* * *

The beast of Sesqua Valley brought the weighty mug to his mouth and drank, while in that liquid that corresponded to mortal blood he could feel the uncanny rhythm that was the valley's heartbeat. The lounge in which he lingered was not overfull, yet each of its few inhabitants could not help but study Simon with surreptitious glances, each of them alert to the sensations in the air and underfoot. The valley came alive, eerily, when potent alchemy was practiced within its confines; and this kind of activity strangely affected those shadow children who had escape the realm of their origin so as to dwell for one little season among mortals. A youngish creature who had been sitting in a dusky corner got to his feet and sauntered to Simon's table, then sat down opposite the beast.

"You've been looking so pensive for weeks. What ails you, Simon?"

"Enigmas that should not subsist," the beast replied before he was fully aware of speaking. Something had indeed affected him. He took another sip of brew and licked his twisted mouth. "The valley is pregnant

with ritual, Cyrus. I should locate the source and join in the lunacy—and yet I am lethargic.”

Cyrus grinned as the bartender brought him a glass of Sesqua brew, from which he drank heartily. “There’s something unique about whatever’s happening tonight. The air smells as it never has before, and the moonlight is peculiar. Do you understand any of it?”

“I am apathetic.”

Cyrus blew air out of his mouth in frustration. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

The beast shut his eyes and raised his head a little higher, in an aspect of listening. “I hear the shadow summoning my return. My stay has been overlong.”

Some figures arose to their feet in shock. Not knowing what to do, the younger creature took Simon’s hand and petted it. “You are the first-born spawn of shadow. You were the first to awaken when the outsiders initially invaded this valley, and you were responsible for their disposal. You are our diabolic lord and master. You can’t abandon us now.”

Something in the beast seemed to awaken. He removed his hand from kinship’s grasp and sneered. “Can I not?” He glared at the other onlookers. “Do you think I would never leave you and return to the realm of origin?”

“But you do return to it. We’ve seen you dance into the mist and watched it swallow you.”

“Ah, you have been spying on me. Yes, I have returned to mist and shadow, but in my mortal frame. To fully return and be as once we were one must completely discard this husk of mortality and its contents. Pah, how little you perceive.”

Cyrus banged the table with an angry fist. “Because you have drawn a mental veil over us, so that we cannot recall our homeland. We see glimpses of it merely, ghosts of memories.” His sudden anger cooled when he noticed the look of sorrow that re-entered Simon’s fantastic eyes. “What’s wrong, beast?”

Simon’s voice, when at last he spoke, was barely a whisper. “I thought if I waited long enough he would return to me, from wherever it is he has vanished to. More and more, however, I am reminded that I know too little, that I have no answers. Did he go away at all, or is he here in some form, in some secret plain of which we are ignorant? He understood the valley far

better than anyone. He was keenly attuned to her tastes, her mysteries and madness. Perhaps he hasn't left us at all—not really. He just doesn't need us —me.”

With that, Simon stopped speaking. Sadly, he reached into his jacket pocket and produced a lean black flute. His music, when he played, was so heart-breaking that the others could not abide it, and thus they departed. Cyrus stayed at the table for as long as he could endure the sound; but the noise was so wretchedly poignant that he, too, had to rise and leave. Simon played on and on, and Sesqua Valley's heart, far beneath the earth and shaking the valley floor with her daemonic pounding, seemed almost to break in pity of the beast.

V

She climbed up the winding stone steps, her hands outstretched and running their fingers over the dry brick with which the cyclopean tower had been constructed; and it amazed, as it always did, the way the atmosphere altered the nearer she got to the circular room at top in which Simon Gregory Williams kept his collection of arcane tomes, esoteric scrolls, and other occult matter. The air changed its fragrance as her eyes saw the glow of reflected light that began to hit the walls that surrounded her, and then she stepped into that light and thought that Simon had lit three-hundred candles, the room was so illuminated. Monique looked around for the room's occupant, hearing his voice before locating where he sat beneath a long table.

“Be gone. I've no appetite for your vituperative mortality this day.”

“I have never abused you,” the young outsider answered.

“Your very existence is an assault. I am sick of humanity. Be gone.”

She knelt beside the table and reached out to him. “What ails thee, beast?”

“Nay, do not touch me with your healing trickery. Save that for your fellow humans. You were up to something last night. The valley reeked of your flesh, your liquid and your marrow.”

“We were engaged in ritual with the black goat of the woods.”

“We?”

“I name no names.”

“You’ve been cavorting with that Scratch creature, have you? Charming. And does he designate himself the Black Goat of the Woods with a Thousand Young? And have you any comprehension what that means?”

“He’s an avatar for Shub-Niggurath. Edith says his being here is a fabulous portent.” She paused, studied him and scowled. “Must you be such a pouty little child? You lured me to this vale to teach me wonders. You should be happy that such marvelous episodes are recurring and instructing me. Is it the idea of Manly that has you so miserable? Come, then, let’s engage in ceremony and summon him. I’ll bet you’ve never actually tried.”

Simon backed away from her, out from under the table and to his throne. Reaching for his seat of power, he hauled himself up and climbed into it. “You are woefully ignorant if you think I would engage in such a ritual with an interloper who has yet to comprehend the ways of Sesqua Valley. I thought, when I encountered you, that you had possibilities and would aid the valley with your properties, which are still so in embryo; but now I see that you are quite dull-witted, and I discharge you as my pupil. Be gone.”

Standing, Monique pushed a pile of books on the table so as to make a place where she could sit with her back to the beast. Gracefully, she raised her arms and began to make strange shadows on the wall. “You were inspired to bring me here, beast, by the valley, and by the Outer God.”

“Outer God? Is this the rot that Scratch has fed you? Do you fancy that your fate is wed to this demesne? I brought you here, and now I dismiss you. What, you’ll not leave. Then I shall. Good day, wench.” He waited and watched, and then he stomped the ground. “Is my authority completely invalid? Have I lost my rule as Supreme Beast of this valley? I will not tolerate this disrespect another instant. I am the first-born of shadow. I am the one who lures the children from mist and shadow into the light of mortal day. Do you sit there and smile at me and defy my authority? Be gone!”

Timidly, Monique crawled to where Simon sat. Tenderly, she removed his shoes and kissed his feet. The young woman kept her head bowed low

as she spoke. “You found me in my lonesome place, and lured me to this fantastic realm. You saw something within me that I could never have discovered on my own. Together, we located a talent, which you have helped me to nurture. But there is more to my being here than you initially realized, a fate that I have half-embraced although I don’t know what it is or what it means. The valley has worked through you to bring me to my destiny. Sesqua has bequeathed its awesome power and authority to you, its first-born son. I do not understand my affinity with the Outer God, but I will kiss that providence because you were supernaturally guided to lure me here. Defy you? I adore you!”

The beast narrowed his eyes at the crouched figure before him; and then he tilted forward and placed a warm hand onto her head. “Arise, mortal, and tell me of this avatar, this black goat of the woods.”

“Well, I don’t understand much of what he told me, such as his being aware of Sesqua Valley because its woodland is conjoined at one point to the forest of the dreamlands. I can see in your eyes that you fathom what that indicates. Perhaps one day you will explain it to me, as you have explained so much, as you have molded the way I think, even the way I speak, as though I am your puppet. He did not explain the nature of the Outer Gods or they he calls the Great Old Ones. At one point he hinted that these gods and Old Ones know of this valley because of you, because you have studied the arcane tomes and spoken their formulae aloud. If I understood him correctly, you have memorized each extant edition of something he pronounced oddly—it was like he was buzzing the title instead of articulating it.”

“Al Azif.”

“Yes—you say it exactly as he did, as if there’s more than one voice proclaiming it. The vibrations of your chanting from the book have transcended dimension. The scent of your language has been picked up by Outer Gods such as Shub-Niggurath and Nyarlathotep, and brought this valley and its mysteries to their notice. They dwell at times, these outer ones, in pockets of shadowed dimension in the woodland that even you cannot detect, and they watch you. At times their influence is seduced by your power as a wizard, and they leak into the dreaming of we who dwell here—mortals and shadow-kindred. Your bringing me here was not chance, not accident; you were guided by an Outer God, to whom you will offer me

with all of your majestic potency. I am to be a vessel for one of the thousand young.”

“How glorious. And what is Edith York’s connection to your fate? I know that she has an interest in Shub-Niggurath. Leonidas has her sculpture of its representation in his curio shop. Does she speak to you of her elder sister? No? That is an enigma I have yet to grasp.” Simon stretched. One hand made curious signals to the air, and Monique could hear the electric sparks that frolicked between Simon’s moving fingers. He moved out of the chair, onto his feet, and walked past the woman without saying another word.

Exiting the round tower, Simon walked the woodland until he came to the ring of stones wherein the young couple had performed their ritual of sex and enchantment. The place still smelled of magick, and Simon saw that he was not alone. The dark man danced within the circle, but stopped when he realized that he was being observed. Gracefully, he genuflected to the beast.

“Do not fawn before me. Explain your presence here.”

“Ah, first-born seed of shadow—favored above the million-favored ones, sorcerer extraordinaire! You are like some fallen angel, dwelling on paltry sorrow. Mortality has tainted you, you who have existed in this realm too long a time. Did you think that you could subsist among humanity for over a century and not be infected? They bequeath you their diseases; why, even your blood has altered in chemistry, and the heart to which it rushes has grown mellow and affectionate. You were once such an exquisite fiend, protecting your valley from measly humanity; and now you bring this child from outside, to study with you and become skilled at your magnificent art. We weep for thee.”

“We?”

“We from Outside.”

“The girl has purpose here?”

“Yes, we shall make use of her. But what of you, Simon Gregory Williams? How often must the shadowed sphere cry out for you before you return unto it absolutely?”

“Not long, perhaps.” The beast raised his snout and sniffed. “I smell providence—potent and compelling. Whatever has brought you here is soon to pass. Why do you smile like that?”

“It is you who have caught our attention, beast. Just as the outsiders initially settled in this place and awakened you in your realm of shadow and mist, so you have drawn us from Outside with your fervid chanting, your demented deviltry. You cannot bend dimension and not be a focus for our questing appetite. You have tugged, subconsciously perhaps, we have responded.”

Simon clasped his hands together and then rubbed them over his monstrous face. “So be it. I don’t want the girl harmed in any way.”

“She will be glorified.”

Simon nodded at the avatar of Shub-Niggurath, and then turned away as the goatish figure began again to dance.

VI

Edith York held the folded gown before her, an offering to the girl. “It was an eccentricity of my siblings to dress oft times for dinner. Victoria was partial to this frock. You’re as tall as she was, I think. Wear this tonight.” Monique took the dress and embraced it to her breast. She then set the gown upon the bed and removed her clothing. Naked, she sat before a bureau and closed her eyes as Edith brushed and anointed her hair. The oils used smelled of frankincense and myrrh. Edith paused in her grooming of the young woman, and when Monique opened again her eyes she caught the elder woman’s momentary emotion.

“Oh dear, how sad and lonely are the valley’s offspring this night. You ache to see Victoria again. And yet—I feel she isn’t far. It’s strange, I feel that way about the other poet as well. William Davis Manly.”

“You’re wiser than you know,” Edith told her, going to the bed and lifting the gown so that it fell open. The naked girl stepped to it and allowed Edith to help her into the dress. “We’re off, then—to the circle.”

“I’ll meet you there. I have one small errand to perform.” So saying, she left the house and entered woodland. She walked some distance and then stopped, perplexed, and she leaned against one tree and wrapped her arms around it. “Assist me, Sesqua Valley—guide me to his lair. The hour

has come for his return.” The trees moved above her in the growing wind that pushed her farther along the path. Extending her arms, Monique clutched at the air that guided her, until she came at last to the hidden bungalow. She entered and found Simon, fully dressed, sitting within a circle of burning candles.

“How dare you infiltrate my lair. Be gone.”

Kneeling before him, the girl offered him her hand. “Come with me. Please, stand with me as I meet my fate.”

“I can sense the sensation of whatever happens to you here. The valley tells me everything.”

“Oh, come on, Simon,” she scolded. “You’ve taught me to embrace the madness of magick. Join with me now in its rich lunacy. Come, daemonic beast, and we shall howl as one.” She watched, as his sneer became an ugly smile, as his paw lifted so as to seize her proffered hand. Monique laughed happily as they rose together and he stepped out of his ring of scented candles. She sang an esoteric song that he had taught her and pranced about him on the path that took them to the place of ceremony.

Simon gazed at the sight before him, surprised that there were only two others participating. Edith was crouched within the circle of stone, while the one who called himself Basil Scratch moved around the stones in danse, a garland on his dome. Watching his movement seemed to enliven the lethargic beast, and Simon reached into an inner pocket of his jacket and produced a pipe. His music was an eldritch sound, and it delighted the goatish man. Nodding his head in time to his tune, Simon reached into the pocket again and produced a second flute, which he tossed to Scratch; and then he moved into the danse, leaping and stomping on the ground as Edith’s silver eyes sparkled with excitement. The small woman reached out to Monique, who joined her within the circle as the valley’s floor began to pulse to the influence of song and transforming alchemy. And then song and movement stopped, replaced by the noise of Edith’s harsh voice raised in chanting. Monique peered into the darkness of the woodland as she sensed the approaching mist, the swirling brume that crept toward them like some fantastic sentient entity. The young girl watched, entranced, as an outline formed within the mist, a figure that caused Edith to cry out. The being floated there, in the whirling miasma—an eidolon that was, in every way, a replication of the statue that Edith York had sculpted of her transformed

sister, she who had been strangely wed to an essence of Shub-Niggurath. Monique did not move as Basil Scratch reached into the circle and offered Edith his hand, which the child of the valley grasped. The black goat tugged the elder woman to the mist, and that which had been Victoria York enfolded her shadow-sister within her arms.

The dark man turned and tossed his flute to Simon; and then he raised his hands above his head and made strange signs to aether. Opening his human mouth, he began to utter an alien litany, and as his droning voice buzzed he began to shed his human façade, transmuting into a thing of black vileness, a gelatinous patch of ichor that stained the valley's air, the stench of which caused Monique to gag. It stretched, this noisome thing, and became gigantic; and then it split open and released a gas-like monster that spread over the place of ritual. Monique gawked at the shapeless mass, in which she could discern globes that were half-formed faces that seemed to cry out to her. An atrocious wisp of the horrific Outer God unwrapped itself from its bulk and filtered to the circle in which the young outsider knelt. Monique beheld the ghost-like visage therein, the mouth of which called her name. Lifting her head to the spectral tissue, Monique pushed her face into its hazy substance and kissed the ethereal countenance. The filmy thing pushed into the human tissue and sank into pores, nostrils, gasping mouth. Monique felt this aspect of the thousand young plant itself as seed within her. The obsidian patch of poison that was the black goat of the woods, no longer immense but shrunken and resembling a spillage of shimmering tar, oozed toward the gas-like entity and embedded itself into it, where it pulsed like some filthy heart. The others watched as the Outer God folded into itself and vanished above the valley's brumal bank.

The valley pulsed as never before, its grotesque buried heart grown wild. Snouted things atop Mount Selta howled awfully, joined by Edith and Simon. The elder woman reached out to the beast, and he stepped toward her and partially into the mauve mist.

"Come with us now, first-born beast. It is the time for your perpetual return. Come dwell with us forever in our home of mist and shadow, beneath the crimson peaks of Khroyd'hon. You often visit there for brief seasons, and bring forth the others who ache to taste a time of mortality; but they can do that now without your guidance. Come, follow us."

Simon reached beyond Edith, deeper into the mist, with both hands and mind. He scanned, supernaturally, the realm of shadow; but the one he sought did not dwell there. Ruefully, he winked at Edith; then, turning away from mist and shadow, Simon Gregory Williams stepped toward the circle of stones, held out his hand to the young woman who wept there, and guided her back to Sesqua Town.

A Quest of Dream

I

I ascended the wide stone steps that led to Adam Webster's bookstore and stopped to smell the red frangipani. Moonlight beamed through the trees that surrounded the large house, and I paused so as to light an opium-tainted cigarette. I sucked, and then I sighed and lifted my eyes so as to watch Luna through the thin blue wreaths of smoke that curled fantastically before me. The tree that spread before me offered its fragrant flowers, and for a moment I fancied that these were blooms of blood before me. Ah, blood and moonlight, smoke and perfumed air. I was surrounded by enchantment. The moon was then veiled by clouds, and I passed through new-born darkness, up the wooden steps that took me to the large canopied porch. I sucked, and then extinguished my cigarette in a tall vase filled with sand and bits of bone. Adam stood before a hearth in the large bookshop that had been constructed by removing walls and turning separate rooms into one spacious chamber. Scented candles provided the sole source of light, the mellow illumination that felt so comfortable on my eyes. Sighing happily, I sank into an armchair and crossed one leg over the other.

"Simon's vanished," I informed him. "He was going to teach me the Ninth Diagram. I'm rather annoyed."

"He's in Prague," Adam informed me, his back to me as he fiddled with some tiny figurines that sat upon the hearth.

"Something's disturbed him. He was behaving so irrationally the last time we met. Rather disconcerting, to see the beast so thrown off balance." The fellow continued to ignore me. "So, what do you have for me?"

“Ah,” he replied, pointing a finger upward as he walked to a bookshelf and removed a title bound in green cloth. “It’s nothing special, but knowing your penchant for Wilde titles I thought you’d enjoy it.” He moved to me and I took the book. *The Harlot’s House and Other Poems* by Oscar Wilde, with “Interpretations” by the artist, John Vassos. I loved old editions of Wilde, and this 1929 title was in perfect shape. I opened to the title piece and read aloud:

“Then, turning to my love, I said,
‘The dead are dancing with the dead,
The dust is whirling with the dust.’”

My recitation was followed by suggestive silence, and as I looked up I saw that the child of shadow was frowning at me. He said, “Wilde was called a corrupter of youth. This is something you share with him. You’ve been influencing Cyrus to dream. This must stop.”

I made a rude noise with my lips. “Don’t be a bore, Adam. Cyrus overflows with curiosity. He’s hungry for new sensations. I taught him the art of concocting an absinthe cocktail the other day, and how happily intoxicated we were, nude and dancing beneath the autumnal moon. It was deliciously Greek. What have you against dreaming? You live in Sesqua Valley, where dreams are enhanced outlandishly. I have only to gaze for a length of time at the white mountain before falling into slumber to experience the most fantastic visions.”

“It is dangerous for us to dream, Jonas. To dream in this valley is to open portals. Simon has explained this to you.”

I squeezed my face so as to make an appalling expression. “The valley itself is a portal. It sucks one in, and twists one’s psyche, and blasts one’s brain. It gathers us, the valley does—we freaks of the world, and teaches us new ways in which to mutate. Ah, sweet intoxicating vale, poisonous and potent. We shut our eyes to your enchanted light, and in dream we follow your moonlit paths. As Wilde once said, so wisely, ‘A dreamer is one who can only find his way by moonlight.’ The moon over Sesqua is ripe for dreamers.”

“Then dream on your own, Jonas. Do not coax my shadow-kindred to follow you. Cyrus is especially susceptible to mortal influence.”

I rose out of the chair and winked at Adam’s ugly face. “Thanks for the book, mate.” Exiting the shop, I walked down the steps and onto the road

that led to town. The moon had undressed herself of clouds, and her naked brilliance touched my eyes with wonder. Opening the book again, I whispered the title poem's opening lines:

“We caught the tread of dancing feet,
We loitered down the moonlit street,
And stopped beneath the harlot's house.”

I walked onto the planks of wood that are the sidewalk of Sesqua Town and stopped before one tall building so that I could listen to the noise that issued from its top floor. There were no blinds before the windows, no ghostly silhouettes; but there were moving shadows, and the tread of dancing feet. Silently, I passed the building's threshold and loiter up the flight of stairs that took me to the floor from which the curious din issued. Cautiously, I walked to where double doors parted and watched the unfathomable dancers as they moved as one within the silent room. I thought immediately of lines by Keats:

“Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter...”

I realized, as I peeped furtively into the room, that I had never before seen so many of the children of the valley gathered in one place; and my curiosity was so compelled that I failed to notice when someone moved behind me, until she pressed one hand upon my shoulder. By some strange instinct, the occupants of the room sensed intrusion and ceased their movement. A horde of silver eyes gazed at me. The female at my side linked her arm with mine and escorted me into the room.

“I can explain everything,” I assured them. “You see, Adam just procured this delightful edition of Wilde's poetry, and I was contemplating its title poem as I passed by. And life, poor shoddy thing, imitated Art—for as in the poem the narrator passes and is perplexed by a room of inhuman dancers, so I became aware of your footfalls on this floor, and I was tempted to watch. I can resist everything except temptation, as you well know. I am human, all too human.”

I turned to acknowledge the creature at my side and saw that she was not native of the valley. Marceline Dubois smiled at me, her eyes of altering shade set within the magnificent ebony face. I could smell the fragrance of her red tresses and for one moment disregarded all else. She turned to kiss the corner of my mouth and one breast brushed against my chest. I watched,

as she moved away from me to the center of the room and raised her arms. Someone in the pack produced a flute and began to play a haunting melody, to which the sorceress moved. Other pipes were pressed to inhuman mouths, and the intoxicating noise drew me to the center of the floor, where I raised my arms and joined in the danse. The seductive music wrapped around me, and I knew that I wanted to be clothed in nothing else. Kicking off my shoes, I unzipped my trousers and let them fall to my ankles. Some kind creature helped me out of them and took my book as I began to unbutton my shirt provocatively, as though it were one of seven veils. I wished for a glass of scarlet wine to spill onto the floor, so that I could dance in its ruby pool.

The music ceased, and I wearied of my waltz. Laughing magically, Marceline helped me to retrieve my clothing, although I did not bother to don them. Nude, I allowed her to guide me from the room and down the bare steps, onto the moonlit road. I suppose I had suffered (happily) a kind of delirium and had no notion as to where I was being escorted until I saw the pale and mammoth monster. I opened my collection of Wilde's verse, but could not find "The Sphinx;" and so I racked my fevered brain and spoke one remembered line:

"A beautiful and silent Sphinx has watched me through the shifting gloom."

Dropping everything except my trousers and books, I slipped into my pants and leaned my torso against the statue's moon-kissed stone. "Perhaps I'll go into the Hungry Place and dream of dead things."

"Whatever are you muttering about?" the black goddess asked me.

I blew air. "Oh, I've been reprimanded about dreaming; or, rather, about influencing Cyrus to dream fantastic things, to dwell in vision as I sing to him the language of arcane tomes. It's absurd, such caution and propriety. Adam lectured me after he gave me this book. 'Dreaming opens portals, Jonas.' Bah! He treats me as though I were a clueless clown."

"You are impulsive, and not wholly sane, Jonas Hobbs. Exactly the sort of fellow we like in Sesqua Town. But Adam is correct. One must use caution in evoking dreams. We dwell in close proximity to the dreamlands, a realm from which influences may leak."

"The what? Dreamlands? This is the first I've heard of it. Simon's never mentioned it."

The sorceress laughed. “He abhors the things utterly denied him. The dreamlands would never allow Simon access—he’s too poisonous, too polluted from having memorized every known edition of *Al Azif*.” She buzzed the title rather than articulating it as humans would.

“I think you’re familiar with this place, this dreamlands. I think you’ve been there.”

She bowed her head to acknowledge that I was correct. “It is where my Elder Brother dwells.”

“Who’s that?”

“The Strange Dark One.”

She narrowed her eyes as I burst out laughing. “If you’re trying to dissuade my interest, you’re going about it ass-backwards. My brain itches with intrigue. How can I summon this realm?”

“One does not beckon the dreamlands. One enters into it. There is a place in the valley where Sesqua’s woodland conjoins with the dreamland’s forest. Oh dear, what dreadful curiosity shimmers in your mortal eyes. You’ve been tainted by the beast, and tingle for arcane manifestation.” Ah, her sinister smile. I watched as she raised one sable hand to Luna and made a curious sign, a sign that I carefully observed and memorized. I listened, as a breeze began to blow, an element of which was caught within Marceline’s magical hand. She tilted her head slightly and smiled at me in such a way that my blood prickled in its veins. Playfully, she moved her closed fist before my face, then took it away as I tried to kiss it. Finally, she blew into that hand and released the mingled air. I watched her fingers open, like petals of some obsidian bloom, and then I looked upward to watch the moon darken as it was covered with what I imagined was a spread of molten shadow.

“I thought you said the dreamlands can’t be summoned.”

“That is correct; but one may call the things that dwell within its precincts.” The wind grew more vigorous, pushing the sweet scents of Sesqua Valley into my face. Marceline’s magnificent hair billowed in the tempestuous air. “Behold!” she exclaimed.

I raised my eyes and saw the fragmented patches of black cloud that wheeled in distant sky. No, they were not clouds; for clouds are not composed of rubbery texture that catches and reflects dim starlight. Clouds are not horned, nor do they spread membranous wings. I beheld the horde

and guessed that they were perhaps fifty in number. I had seen their curious image before, on an antique piece of parchment that Simon had shown me in his round tower. When I asked him what the illustration represented, he tapped the image fondly and chuckled. “Night-gaunts,” he answered.

II

I spent the next three days in Simon’s cyclopean round tower, finding anything I could related to night-gaunts and the dreamlands; but I didn’t know where to look, for his collection of arcane lore was vast and kept in a chaotic lack of order. Books, scrolls, bas-reliefs and maps were scattered everywhere. The circular walls and floor of the mammoth upper room were covered with cobwebs, dust and diagrams in chalk. Such a litter of lore, and yet I could not find the data that I sought. And then I had a hunch, and trotted down the winding steps of the ancient tower. I found one of the queer stone circles that existed in the valley, reclined therein and closed my eyes. I summoned the forest of the dreamlands as new sensation chilled my brain. I sang to valley air and sensed the things that pranced around me, and when I partially lifted my eyelids I witnessed the blurry shapes of dark shaggy creatures of diminutive stature that danced around my circle of chiseled stones. Reaching outward, I touched the tiny paws that pulled me from the circle, and I knew that these wee creatures could lead me to the place where the valley’s woodland met the land of dream. They did not do so; rather, they guided me out of the woods and onto a road that took me to town. Frustrated, I crept to the silent sphinx and violently knocked my head against its unyielding stone. I was about to repeat the action when I saw, through streams of blood and tears, movement in the Hungry Place, the neglected cemetery where outsiders to the valley are oft times interred.

The figure, book in hand, watched me as I entered the somber site, but did not cease his gambol until he noticed that beads of blood fell from my chin, to earth. Using the back of one hand, I wiped away the stream of blood that spilled from where my forehead flesh had torn. Reaching into a

pocket, he produced a clean white handkerchief. "Use this. We do not want to titillate this earth with liquid gore. Hello, Jonas."

"Eldon, whatever are you doing here?"

How extraordinary, his laughter. "I've had the most delirious dream, of dancing on my tomb!" His voice was high-pitched; it quivered as it issued from his throat, emotional and mad. This was Eldon Prim, one of the valley's suicidal poets. That he was still among the living astonished us, for Sesqua Valley has an appetite for those so richly lunatic and plays with them, psychically, as cats play at tormenting mice. Eldon's supernatural scars ran deep. I saw that he was peering at me intensely, as if to read my mind. Again, his manic laughter. "But we are outsiders, Jonas—there'll be no tombs for us; there will be this hungry sod, and only that, unless we keep company with whatever crawls beneath it. This is where I'll be planted, this will be my grave. And so I dance upon it. Wheel!"

I felt it then, the suggestion of a pulse beneath my foot, as if some stagnant heart had found resuscitation. Placid dizziness coaxed my knees to bend, and I knelt within the Hungry Place, before the dancing man. The earth on which I kowtowed was soft and enticing, and I pushed my hand into its depth. The mad poet fell beside me and set the book he held upon the ground. I saw that it was the thin hardcover collection of his poems that a friend in Boston had published in a very limited print run. The hand that had held the book grasped my wrist and pulled my hand from earth.

"No, Jonas, no. You're not the one who dreamed of dancing in the Hungry Place. It has not summoned thee. 'Tis not your paltry flesh for which it has an appetite. Nay, remove your mortal hide and let me plant mine own." He reached into his coat's deep pocket and pulled out a deadly ritual knife, the very sharp blade of which caught and reflected starlight. Looking up to the stars, Eldon raised one hand and made a little sign unto the sky; and then he rested his hand on the hard surface of his book and, using the dagger, liberated one finger from his hand. An undertone of hilarity issued from some deep place in his throat as he planted his severed digit into the cemetery sod. The valley pulsed more vigorously, and some snouted thing bayed beneath the peaks of Mount Selta. "Arthur Meikle is such a splendid sculptor, have him fashion me a tombstone. Farewell, Jonas Hobbs."

I stood and watched for just a little while, as the Hungry Place sifted its soil around the lunatic. He laughed, the sinking man, and sang, a noise that served as background music as I exited the place. I leaned against the moon-kissed sphinx until the distant noise silenced, and when I turned to look again into the Hungry Place I saw that it was void of occupant. But then a distant figure climbed onto a far section of the low stone wall that surrounded the cemetery and leapt into the graveyard. I turned away and leaned the back of my head against the smooth stone of the sculpted beast and let the moonlight play upon my eyes, and I wondered again at how singular the moon looked as it floated over Sesqua Valley, how its shadows formed faces and expanded and then melted and then blossomed again as other expressive things.

“Eldon’s gone,” a soft voice told me. I did not regard the young creature at my side. “I found his book in the Hungry Place. Guess I’ll take it to the tower. You have it, don’t you?”

I replied in quotation:

“I hold it in, the hot and frantic breath.

I won’t exhale the words of lunacy.

I won’t pronounce your poison’d shibboleth

And enter custom with insanity.

Remember when you talked to me of pain

And pierced a splinter into my soft eye?

Remember how that splinter sliced my brain

And planted dreams wherein the starlight died?

Peace, peace. Your language is still whispered in the wind.

Silence all the shrieking in my brain.

All your arcane lunacy rescind.

I will not mouth your fatal name again.

I will not move among your nightmare race.

I’ll find deep solace in some hungry place.”

Cyrus nodded. “Weird. He wrote that before he came to the valley.”

“It’s not weird at all, young creature.” I countered. “The valley seeks we who are demented, we who have been tainted by unholy alchemy. It lures us to its confines and sups upon our madness, thus nourishing its own.”

“You’re laughing at me, aren’t you? You like to pose as so superior,” the lad complained.

I shrugged. “For someone born of Sesqua’s shadow, you’re hopelessly innocent. Where is your edge of danger, Cyrus? One would mistake you for human.”

“I’m not—human. Just because I’m not as diabolic as Simon and some others...”

I raised a hand to silence him. “No matter, I’ve been ordered to avoid you. Adam asserts that I’m corrupting your soul.” Slyly, I smiled at him. “Do you shadow-spawn of this haunted valley have souls, I wonder? Or merely appetite?”

“You’re talking a lot of nonsense tonight, Jonas. Leonidas must have slipped you some of his nasty narcotics. As for Adam, he’s not my master, nor our concern. We’ll continue with our studies. Good evening.”

I smiled at the bravado in his voice and watched him walk away. Then I remembered Eldon’s request, and so I sauntered up the road, to the large building that housed an artistic studio that was shared by members of the community. I did not care for the arrogant artist whom Eldon had named, but I knew his craftsmanship was exceptional, and so I entered the building and watched its few inhabitants at work. I was surprised to see that Arthur was working on a canvas rather than devoting his masculine hands to the sculptor’s task; and as I gazed at his painting on its easel my curiosity was piqued, for the ebony beast that was gradually revealed in its dark surroundings seemed familiar. The artist ignored me as I stepped to him until I bent to stroke the piece of paper that had been thumb-tacked to the canvas. When Arthur spoke to me, his voice was low and haunting in its effect.

“They spill like patches of liquid shadow from their realm of fabulous darkness, and they esteem our adoration as our wonder-struck faces are reflected on their smooth blankness.” I uncurled the piece of paper, which proved to be an image of a fantastic fiend. It was winged and faceless and incredibly lean; indeed, there was almost something sinister in its sinewy and compact form, and in its stance, which bespoke of incredible strength. Unpinning it from the canvas, I lifted the rectangular piece of paper to the overhead light and saw that it was indeed a photograph from life.

“Eldon has been swallowed by the Hungry Place. His last request was that you make a marker to his memory.”

“Ah,” the other fellow uttered, “do we know his birth date? No matter, we shall record the day of—well, one cannot quite call it extinction, from what we know of our fate beneath the Sesquan sod. You were there?”

“Yes.”

Arthur tilted his head and regarded me queerly. “I’ve heard about you, Hobbs. You like to dwell in the dangerous places. I’ve heard you’ve actually ascended Mount Selta and swam in one of its sequestered pools.”

“There’s only one pool, inside a cavern of crimson rock. Yes, I found it curious, that a mountain with so white an exterior should have scarlet walls within. But you’ve journeyed yourself,” I countered, holding up the snapshot. “You’ve found a way into the dreamlands.”

He laughed. “No. The gaunts may be summoned if one knows the art. They love the light of our plump moon on their rubbery hide, and to feel the reflection of our faces on the surface beneath their horns.” He noticed my expression and laughed again. “You’re beguiled, Hobbs, and so you should be. The entire idea of a dreamland is hypnotic. How did such a realm come into existence? Is it formed of mortal dreaming, or is it the weave-work of some elder gods? Can we enter it as phantoms only, leaving behind our husks of flesh and bone? The night-gaunts are decidedly physical, and yet one senses that they are elementals of nightmare. So many scrumptious questions, so few boring answers.”

I touched my free hand to the canvas on which the oblique silhouette of the depicted creature swam in gathered shadow. “Is this in preparation for a work in stone? I thought sculpturing was your forte.”

“No, this is just an idea I had. I’ll give it to you once it’s finished. You obviously have some kind of affinity with night-gaunts. You should see your face, Jonas—you’re caught. Maybe they’ll lure you to their ghoulish haunted woodland and let you cross over.”

I didn’t know how to answer him, for something in his words, and in the image on canvas, had indeed “caught” my imagination. He smiled at me as I opened my mouth to reply, and then he laughed out loud when the words caught in my throat. I had given the artist my message from the man who had been sifted through the cemetery loam, and my errand thus accomplished I made my escape. Night’s wind had picked up considerably,

and I raised my hands to push hair from my eyes; and I saw that I still held Arthur's photograph of his perplexing model, the silhouette of which looked different in the moonlight. Pushing the print into my pants pocket, I scanned the sky at the place where Marceline had conjured forth the horde of winged night-beasts, and then I followed the road away from Sesqua Town, toward a wooded area. Glancing over my shoulder, I saw the moon as an enormous disc just over the twin-peaked mountain.

I entered the silent woodland, escaping wind and starlight. The place seemed preternaturally hushed, and of a sudden some lines from a poem by Wilde oppressed my memory:

“To outer senses there is peace,
A dreamy peace on either hand
Deep silence in the shadowy land,
Deep silence where the shadows cease.”

I wandered into deeper gloom, into a dreamy peacefulness. Although the place was dark, my vision had adjusted to my surroundings, and cool verdant shade soothed my eyes. As I marched along the path I could feel the photograph in my pocket as an entity near my inner thigh. My fancy dwelt on the fabulous creature, the night-gaunt of dreamland; and as I imagined it I held my arms aloft, as if perhaps I could sense the other realm with fingertips, for certainly its air would be of a different chemistry. I sought the essence of that incorporeal aether with my mind as my mouth hungered to gulp it, deeply.

I sensed another occupant of woodland, and looked about me until I saw the ghostly silhouette, the lissome outline, the phosphorescent eyes. Young Cyrus reached out to me with anxious hands, which I clutched. “You’re crazy to be out here alone at this hour. What the hell are you about?”

“I seek the dreamlands.”

He shook his head ruefully. “Damn, you’re crazy. Come on, let’s return to town.”

“No. Hang you, boy, I’m being called, compelled to find that other sphere. It summons me just as surely as Sesqua Valley once did.”

“Jonas, you’ve been bewitched by magick, that is all. You’ve been staring too deeply into arcane lore, your eyes have drunk too deeply of sigils and schema. The beast of Sesqua Valley has corrupted you. I know

too well that shimmer in your eyes, which is the sign of an intoxicated soul. I've witness it on Simon's insane eyes many times. Your quest is folly, my friend. You could never find the dreamlands."

I grabbed his coat by the shoulder and shook him. "How do you know? What's to hinder me?"

He leaned closer to me, and I could smell the fragrant valley on his inhuman hide. "You lack the required innocence," he stated simply, in his quiet voice.

"You've been there." I had a sudden hunch, and by his air of false nonchalance I knew that I had struck a note. "You've been to the dreamlands—you know the way. Admit it."

He shrugged and grinned. "I admit nothing. Oh hell, follow me." Surprised, I watched him trot toward a second pathway and vanish from sight. I rushed after him, tripping over small shrubs and almost losing balance. Something tickled my sense of play, and I chuckled gleefully. Running through the woods reminded me of my childhood, when every summer was spent chasing through the mammoth woods of a lakeside park. I would sometime build small altars of twigs within those woods and dance around them; or oft times I would merely recline on supple and aromatic earth and daydream. Some pocket of my soul ached to stop and lay upon this earth—and dream. How dare the child of shadow say that I lacked innocence? At that moment I felt a purity of soul.

The woodland opened up as some gargantuan shape arose before me, and I watched Cyrus dig his fingers into the sharply sloping soil of a colossal mound that rose above the moon drenched trees. Happily, I scampered up the slope in pursuit of my crony, not resting until I reached the mound's apex. Cyrus sat on the ground, and as I knelt beside him I looked behind me and saw that Mount Selta was far behind us. Distant hills surrounded us, as did the spreading woods.

"There," Cyrus whispered as he pointed to a far-off district. "Do you see the place where shadows cease, that region of verdant mist that captures moonbeams? Come on, use your arcane senses."

I strained to see what he could perceive, but it was not to be. A sob of frustration caught inside my throat. Suddenly, the boy's hand combed through my hair, and then it wound through strands and tugged me to him. I felt his tender kiss upon my eyes. He leaned away from me as I looked

again. I saw the eerie region. “The forests of dreamland,” I sighed. Oh, the ache I knew within the pit of my being. I raised one hand as if I might have touched the other place, and the sight of that hand held in the air reminded me of another hand, one that was beautifully black. Memory grew keen, queerly so, and I saw within its depths the movement of Marceline’s hand, as she made weird gesticulations to the sky. I remembered exactly the formation of her fingers.

“What are you doing?”

I smiled but did not look at him, for my eyes were enchanted by remote movement. They rose from out the outlying mist, dark patches of rubbery blackness that caught the sheen of moonlight on their immortal flesh. I stood to greet them as they sallied toward the mound, and I raised my hands to their horrendous beauty as they encircled me in the air. One member of the horde floated to me and hovered just above the ground. I thrilled to the sound of its membranous wings beating in the air, at the rich smell of its ghastly inky flesh. As it hovered close before me rich moonlight fell upon its facelessness, and on that slate of jet I saw a vague reflection of my visage. I welcomed the clawed hands that reached for me, and shouted maniacal hilarity as I was fiendishly tickled. My lunatic laughter seemed to attract others of the flock, and soon I was being lifted off the mound, held by hands that tormented me with their touch. I did not look down as someone shouted my name, and soon I could hear nothing but the beating of leathery wings as I was taken to the other place, as I was ushered into the mist of dreams.

The Strange Dark One

I

I have looked through black trees to a dry and dead moon,
There in a darkened sky, a place of ultimate omission,
Which expands overhead like some cauldron of nightmare,
An abyss of evening.

Overhead, a yawning universe seethes,
As if to devour this world and we
Who creep insignificantly on it,
We who stumble and find no hold of sanity.
A chill madness seeps down from darkness;
It touches the hoary stones
Of this unholy house in this valley
Where chaos and lunacy dance,
Where they move in an atmosphere haunted
By the mockery there on His mask,
His façade of Imperial Midnight.
He offers His hand to our tongue.

(rough draft of a poem by William Davis Manly, left unfinished at the
time of his disappearance)

II

There is a place of phantasy and fear, and of sublimity, where things are found in darkness, and sometimes found in dream. April Dorgan found such things within a haunted valley that was surrounded by hills and mountains—a place that beguiled, and mocked, and poisoned. It was an uncanny place, and perhaps that was a portion of its allure; for the young woman had a bohemian nature that perplexed her stolid family, who could not understand the way she dressed, the books she read, the language she uttered. When, in early adulthood, she inherited her grandfather's bookshop, she turned the place into a gathering of like souls, replacing the majority of the shop's books for those titles that especially pleased her decadent clientele. There was, however, one room where no one was allowed, and this was the large back room that her grandfather had furnished as his personal living quarters and library. And it was that library that perplexed her just as much as she confounded others in the staid Wisconsin town. The room had a special aura, for it was there, as a teenager, that she would sit with her ailing grandsire and listen to his wild eccentric talk. It was there that he would show her certain books kept behind a locked cabinet; and sometimes he would mumble of the time he spent in the darkest part of Rick's Lake and of what he imagined he had experienced there. April had resented the way that her mother and uncles had tried to shield her from the old man's strange tales, as if to listen to such talk would taint one with some kind of mental contagion. Thus she formed a secret bond with her grandfather, and thus he left the bookshop to her in his will; which was just as well, for no one else in the family had shown any interest in the future of the place and would probably have sold it. She loved it. She loved the old house wherein it was located on the first floor, she loved delving into the life of being a bookseller and connecting with other like souls, who, once discovering her especial literary interests, often sent her gifts of the most provocative titles, often in French.

But most of all she loved her grandfather's study, into which she moved a bed so that she could sleep and dream there, often with one of the old man's strange books on the bed beside her. She could not remember when she had located the old man's private journal, in which she had first learned of Sesqua Valley and its weird inhabitants. It was odd: reading that journal brought back memories from her childhood that she had imagined were bad dreams, of sitting on the floor of her grandfather's shop as a very

young girl and looking over large picture books when certain people came to visit her grandfather, persons who were the rare individuals allowed into his private chamber. April remembered the furtive nature of these folk, and something about their appearance that beguiled and unsettled her. One very tall fellow who always wore a wide-brimmed hat especially captivated her, for he would always stop to kneel next to her and ask, "What are you reading today, Miss April?" She had a faint recollection of something strange about his eyes and the smell of his clothing. She also remembered the emotional state her grandfather was often in after having conferred with these curious visitors. Once, just before the end of his days, when he began to allow her to sit with him in his study and discuss the future of the bookshop, she casually mentioned these customers.

"Ah," the old man had replied, "Simon Gregory Williams and his brood. Yes, he may show his snout once he learns that you've taken over the business. They have an interest in some of the titles I have locked away. You'll want to have nothing to do with them. They're some kind of occultists, I think."

It wasn't until after her Grandfather's death that she found, in a desk drawer, one of his private journals in which she found more information, but of a disturbing kind. "I've taken some books to Williams in his home of Sesqua Valley. They weren't the worst kind and he paid a good price. He asked me some perplexing questions concerning Rick's Lake and Professor Gardner, which I didn't answer. I had heard, of late, of recent activity at Rick's Lake; someone has removed the curious small stone totem that stood near the lodge, with its topmost image of the Faceless God. I have my suspicions, but I said nothing to Williams at the time. He asked his usual questions concerning the Professor and I explained again that we did not have actual copies of *De Vermis Mysteriis* and the *Pnakotic Manuscripts* but rather photostat copies of manuscript and printed pages taken from those texts. He doesn't believe me, of course, because he's glanced at some of the titles that I've collected since then, books that I keep under lock and key. He questioned me about my dreams, damn him. How he could know about such things I cannot fathom. There is almost a sensual quality in his voice when he speaks of the ancient texts and their addictive lore. He left me another list of titles in which he had interest, and I wonder if he guesses it is from some of his previous lists that I have found the secret books that I

have sequestered in my personal occult library. Some of the titles have proved disturbing, and having them near me has been most unpleasant. Thus I gathered some in a box and drove to Adam Webster's bookshop in Sesqua Valley. The memory of that place—well, I have no recollection of it! I cannot now remember any detail of my visit there, or of the valley itself. I am left with some vague unpleasant impression—that is all."

In another journal April had found a list of titles in which Simon Gregory Williams had expressed especial interest, followed by the extravagant prices for which Williams was ready to pay for such volumes; and it distressed the young woman to find some of those volumes behind the glass doors of the locked cabinet. There was also a map of the Northwest region where the valley was located, with notes of his journey to the place in her grandfather's hand. Her curiosity piqued, April placed some of the titles in a box, added the journal which listed titles of interest to this Simon Gregory Williams, and drove to Sesqua Valley. She drove for an entire day, slept for a while in a forlorn motel, and then completed her drive after seven hours, when at last she began to descend into a valley surrounded by mountains and forested hills. A swerving road took her into a small town, and she was instantly charmed by the feel of the place, by its aura of quietude, by the wooden sidewalks and surrounding woodland. A titanic twin-peaked mountain of white stone captivated her with its stunning beauty as it shimmered in the pale sunlight of late morning. Parking the car, she stepped out and breathed in the sweet air as she admired the old structures that made up what must have been the downtown area of the town. She looked around but saw nothing that looked like a bookstore, and when she heard footfalls on the planks that made up the sidewalk, she turned to smile at two young men who walked toward her.

"Hi," she hailed. "I'm looking for the Adam Webster bookshop."

The smaller of the lads spoke. "That will be up the Place of Hawks hill road. I was on my way there, actually."

She held out her hand to him. "I'm April Dorgan, from Wisconsin. My grandfather used to sell rare books to Mr. Simon Williams. I've brought some titles that I thought would especially interest him, or Mr. Webster. May I give you a lift to the shop? Then you could guide me."

The two young men exchanged looks, and April studied their curious facial features, which reminded her of something she could not place. "I'm

Cyrus. Yes, let me show you the way, it's not far." He patted the other lad on the back and then joined April in entering the car, directing her away from the place and along a rutted road that began to rise as hillside. "There's the house, just behind those trees. You can park at the steps leading up to it. Let me get that box of books for you, Miss Dorgan, it looks heavy." She parked near a flight of stone steps that led to one of the strangest houses she had ever seen, one that looked sinister and solitary and very old. Quietly, she followed Cyrus up the steps, which had been usurped by weed and yellow grass, and noticed him studying the books in the box he carried. Reaching the top of the steps, they walked along a gravel path to the three wooden steps that led up to an enormous canopied porch, on which she saw a porch swing and a bin of discarded books. The door of the dwelling had been propped open, and from within the house there came a sound of someone playing a pipe. They crossed the threshold, and April studied the tall man whose back was to them as he looked out an eastern window, toward the white mountain. The music emitted from him, and when at last he stopped his playing and turned around April saw that he held a flute made of shining red wood. He did not smile at her, nor did he speak; and something in the stern gaze of his silver eyes bewildered her with subtle fear and memory. The face seemed very familiar in an uncanny way, and she was repulsed by its ugly combination of features that reminded her of frog and wolf. The unfriendly eyes turned to watch as Cyrus placed the box onto a low table.

"What have we here?" the gentleman asked.

"Some years ago Simon Gregory Williams used to visit my grandfather's bookshop in Wisconsin, and he expressed interest in the books that are in that box. For some reason my grandfather was unwilling to part with them. I was hoping you could show them to Mr. Williams and perhaps he and I can come to some agreement regarding price."

"Simon is in Europe, but I know his tastes. I'll be occupied until tomorrow. Are you able to stay overnight? I have a room upstairs that you are welcome to use while you stay in Sesqua Valley. Was your grandfather Laird Dorgan? Yes, I met him once, when I accompanied Simon to your town. Cyrus will show you to your room. I'll be dining late tonight, and perhaps you'll join me and we can talk, hmm? Excellent. The Eastern Room, Cyrus, with its magnificent view of Mount Selta and the woodland.

Is your luggage in your car? Why not loan Cyrus your keys and he'll carry it to your room. You're very tired, after such a lengthy drive, and a little rest will do you a world of good. You'll find the bed comfortable."

She followed the younger man out of the room and up a flight of carpeted stairs. The room into which she was led was small and beautifully furnished with sturdy antique pieces. The bed did indeed look inviting, and after she thanked Cyrus for his help and gave him the keys to her car, she reclined on the bed and shut her eyes. From somewhere below came the sound of someone playing a haunting melody on a flute.

III

The universe was a black and silent sea in which her eyes floated, seeing nothing. It reminded her of the sonnet by Sri Aurobindo, "The Unseen Infinite," and its line about "the unconscious dreadful dumb Abyss." Her eyes floated, peering, their whiteness the only stars. Then, from the sea of infinity, one shape arose, blacker than oblivion. It rose and watched her with a semblance of an obscure face, a face that was almost featureless. The figure's hands, gloved with pitch, rose to its dark almost-face, and pulled, until the face was free. It reached that face to those spools, her eyes, which rolled to it and fastened into tight sockets. As she looked again into nothingness, she saw the whorls of shadow that wheeled around like some vision of Ezekiel, orbits of blackness spinning within each other, tugging at her essence. The mask into which her eyes were set spun like some web of gloom in cosmic nothingness, and with great effort she closed the flaps of mask that were her eyelids.

Her eyes opened to darkness, focused, noticed the dim rectangle of light that contained a silhouette that watched her. She raised herself onto her elbows and peered at the figure whose face she could not see. "Why is it so dark?"

"You've slept—and darkness falls early in the valley at this time of year. Do you hunger? I have set a table for our repast. Come."

She sat up and moved her feet into her sandals, stood up and moved to the figure in the doorway. Adam Webster backed away to allow her exit from the room, and the soft hallway light illuminated his weird face. "I am a little hungry," she confessed.

"Excellent. The meal that I've prepared will please you." Webster offered her his arm, which she took, and together they walked down the stairs and into a dining room. He pulled out a chair for her to sit into, then went to a side table where he opened covered dishes and plated her some food. She took hold of the glass of wine before her and breathed in the liquor's sweet aroma, which reminded her of the smells of the valley that had wafted to her when she had first entered its confines. He sat and began to eat in silence, not regarding her in any way. The food was delicious, as was the wine, and after she had dined she lost some of the foreboding that the place and its inhabitant had inspired. The Sesquan looked up and caught her staring at his face, and this made him smile a secret smile. He rose and went to a small side table from which he took an object, and then he pulled one of the dining table chairs nearer to her and sat. She saw that the book was her grandfather's journal in which he had listed books desired by the mysterious Simon Williams. Webster set the small journal near her and tapped it. "Do you know what happened to the items mentioned in the back of this journal, the Pnakotic Manuscripts and Book of Eibon? I cannot ascertain if they were actual editions of the book or mere photostatic copies as was their Necronomicon."

April frowned. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Ah—perhaps you didn't notice the writing in the back of the journal, after many pages had been left blank." He opened the book and showed her some back pages on which her grandfather had, long ago, scribbled some odd notes.

"Dreaming about the dweller in darkness—perhaps a result of the memories roused by study of the photographic copy of Necronomicon, or

Book of Eibon and P. Manuscripts. I see that damn totem that was beside the lodge in the woods, with its reptilian faces and wings. I'm tempted to trek to Rick's Lake again so as to copy the markings on that totem—yet I am reluctant to return. I don't care to hear again those buzzing voices or the howling Thing. And yet it tugs me to it, that haunted place."

“I never noticed those passages,” April lied as she flipped over other pages of equally cryptic notations in her grandfather’s hand. “The Book of Eibon and De Vermis Mysteriis in the box I brought were purchased by Grandfather after the incident at Rick’s Lake and his quitting his position at the university so as to establish his bookshop. He told me the tale of Rick’s Lake near the end of his life, many times, and I know that the photostatic copies of occult books that they had in the lodge mysteriously vanished. I went with him once to the lodge, during a period when he was driving himself frantic with bad dreams, and he seemed unnerved that this stone totem had been removed as he especially wanted to examine it. He opened up to me, you see, when I became interest in the Bohemian lifestyle and began to bring friends to the bookshop, and he seemed to delight in joining us during our séances and such.”

“Have you an interest in the occult, Miss Dorgan?”

She closed her grandfather’s journal and pushed it from her. “No. I saw the way such things affected Grandfather, and that rather turned me off. He got very bad near the end, writing symbols on walls and floor with chalk, sneaking out and running naked through a nearby woods. It was in those woods that we found him one last time, with a strange book in his lifeless hand.”

“And what book was that?”

“I don’t know. I burned it after the funeral, as I was tempted to burn all of the weird books he had locked in his cabinet. Then I found that journal with those extraordinary prices offered him by Mr. Williams, and that kept the books from flame. The shop does well enough, and my needs are modest; but it would be pleasant to have a nice sum in the bank for special occasions. When do you expect Mr. Williams to return from Europe?”

“One cannot say. No matter. I’m prepared to pay you the sums he offered your grandsire. The books are rare indeed, and in excellent condition. Simon will be pleased.”

He took up the small journal and smiled at her. “Are you happy with your room?”

“Oh, yes. It’s enchanting. Those beautiful antiques...”

“Excellent. Stay as long as you wish. It’s often good to ‘get away,’ as people say.”

Webster rose, took up their plates and vacated the room. April stood and stretched, and then she found her way to the front door and sat on the porch swing gazing at the nighted valley, the enormous sky. The sky looked unfamiliar to her, as it had never appeared before, not that she had ever shown much interest in the heavens. She caught a hazy remnant of her dream and thought again of the line of poetry, “the unconscious dreadful dumb Abyss,” and felt that image as never before; for the blackness above her did seem like some abyss into which she might fall should she release her tight hold on the arm of the swing. She thought about the sonnet’s closing lines, wherein is conveyed the human soul’s relationship with the Unseen, with whom humanity is kindred. This was the pathological obsession of her grandfather, and she had never given the matter serious thought, dismissing it as the mental wanderings of an elderly mind. Yet coming to Sesqua Valley had triggered something that she didn’t understand—a sensation that filled her disquiet that was not altogether unpleasant. It was unsettling, certainly, to meet people who seemed as serious about these obsessions of her grandfather as he had been. There was something about Adam Webster’s interest in her grandfather’s books and history that seemed too keen, too interested. Perhaps the rare old books were far more fabulous than she realized; perhaps they were worth more than her grandfather had suspected, more than the generous offering made by Simon Gregory Williams.

Her brain hurt from too much thinking. Yes, she would stay here for a day or two, take a holiday from home, and see the way that others lived. She realized that her life had begun to follow a safe and regular routine, and this annoyed her as it conflicted with her image as a woman who was living an interesting life so different from the staid realities of her family, her boring mother and uncles who had no sense of adventurous living, of radical thought. Her rebellion had been to live what she thought of as an “alternative” lifestyle, but she realized that it hadn’t taken much to seem “different” in her little Wisconsin town. She now laughed at how naive it had all been. It was here, in sequestered Sesqua Valley, that she really felt removed from normality as she understood it. Everything here was strange and truly different. She closed her eyes and pushed with her feet so that the chair would sway gently back and forth, a movement that suddenly brought

a memory of sitting as a little child in her grandfather's lap as he rocked her to and fro. April smiled at memory and closed her eyes.

Adam Webster sat in soft electric light, his eyes closed, his senses on high alert. He heard the movement behind him as young Cyrus entered the room. "You're looking severe," said the lad.

"I don't like this kind of surprise when Simon is absent. We've had some pleasant quiet years without outsiders invading our terrain."

Cyrus laughed softly. "We're the invaders, Adam. This is more her element than our own."

"How little you yet understand. The valley is our demesne. We are part of the elemental air, the primal earth. We are clothed for a little while in these primitive aspects of mortality, until such time as we return to the realm of shadow and mist. The mountain is our ancestor. It is the valley that gives us form and flesh and breath. We are one, for a season."

Cyrus shrugged. "So what are we to do with her?"

"The valley will instruct us. Put your ear to earth."

"She's not like the usual outsider, Adam. She's been tainted by the Outside. Can't you smell it on her?"

"That may be merely the contagion of her grandfather's infection, which he contracted during his time in Rick's Lake. Simon knows more of the matter than I, but I know enough. She's looked into the ancient tomes, and to do so is to be touched, however one may misconstrue the manifestations of dream and dread. The Old Ones are forever playing tricks, as you have learned. Miss Dorgan has assuredly been brought to us under some influence and design. This is no happenstance. She likes you, and so you will be her friend. We'll keep her here for a few days until I understand her fate, or must decide it." He turned his head and gazed steadfastly into the young man's eyes. "Put your ear to earth, Cyrus. It's time that you became more attuned. You're too fond of the mortal world. Go and do your work."

The older man watched the lad back away and exit the room. Reaching into his jacket pocket, he took out his flute and brought it to his lips. The airy music rose into dark air; it floated to the porch and entered the dreaming of the young outsider who had fallen asleep on the porch swing.

IV

April awakened from a deep and dreamless sleep and found herself in bed, having no recollection of returning to her room and retiring. Her suitcases had been brought up to the room, and she found her car keys on a bedside table. Changing into fresh clothes, she walked to the lower level and found it vacant of inhabitants, and thus she decided to wander the valley and find a place to breakfast. The day was sunny and pleasant, and she decided to walk farther along the road, which led into the surrounding woodland. There was a hush in the valley, it seemed almost unnaturally quiet, and she could not help imagining that it was listening, to her perhaps. Never had a region had such an aura of patient sentience. Sesqua Valley seemed a living presence that was fully aware of her and everything around it. The mountain stood as some twin-peaked sentinel, watching over everything, protecting the place. At last she came to a clearing surrounded by mammoth trees, and she stopped to examine a curious statue of black stone that stood three feet in height and resembled some kind of cat-faced gargoyle with a head raised in howling, a crude suggestion of folded wings on its back portion. The stone with which the beast had been composed was smooth as silk.

She turned her gaze from the statue to the other statues that tilted on the grassy field before her, and then she looked beyond them to the structure that was situated on a raised plot of ground, earth from which vapors of mauve mist arose. She had seen an almost identical structure on a program on Wales that she had watched on PBS, a church that had been built in the 1700's. The black pile before her could have come from that era, its stones were so discolored with age. The ruin looked abandoned and uninviting, and yet the young woman felt compelled to advance toward it, to climb the slight incline and touch her hand to the cool rough blocks of stone with which the building had been constructed. April stopped at one of the wide arched cavities that led into the mist-enshrouded church and studied the totem that greeted her; the bizarre creation exuded an aura of age identical to that of the building's black stone, and it was certainly like

nothing she had ever seen before, for she had never seen a totem onto which long lean arms had been fastened, one of which was weirdly outstretched with its fingers in a position of beckoning, while the other arm hung at its side and the hand of which almost touched the grassy ground. These arms extended from the lowest portion of the totem, a base four feet in height on which barely legible symbols or alphabet had been chiseled aeons ago. Above this was the first visage, which seemed little more than a distorted skull with an oval mouth that reminded April of Munch's "The Scream." Above this was an elongated octopoid head to which two small eagle-like wings had been attached. It was the third topmost head that filled April with disquiet and moved her to moan in horror; for there was no real visage but rather a blank mask-like surface that, nonetheless, contained an aspect of mockery. It utterly perplexed the young woman—her eyes began to itch as she studied it. Her hands went to her eyes, which shut, yet as she rubbed her eyes she was overwhelmed with a violent vertigo. Red and black shadows whirled before her eyelids, drawing her into a kaleidoscopic void in which she spiraled. Stumbling forward, April reached out and touched the wall of the ancient edifice, and she recoiled at the chilliness of its stones, which had not been warmed by the late morning sunlight.

It was difficult to see because her eyesight was so blurred as she felt her way along the wall, to the opening that led into the building. She found the arched threshold and stood listening to the soft chorus of sound that came from somewhere within the church, a sound that wafted to her as gentle wind that washed her face and cleared her vision. Unlike the building's stone, this wind was hot, like living breath pushing to her from some mammal's mouth. Crossing the threshold, she entered the church, initially confused at the sight before her. The place was definitely a temple—to art. Strange and grotesque statues stood against walls and in dusky corners. Diabolic figurines and satanic objets d'art squatted on pillars of various width and height. One small statue, that at first she took to be a replica of Lucifer, was in fact a representation of Pan playing his pipe, his hooved feet seemingly preparing to lift in dance. Her flesh crept; she hugged herself and rubbed her hands over her arms. She was, in fact, rather surprised at her reaction to the place; for in her Bohemian life she had met some few persons who identified as witches, and she had once sat within a

coven circle; but the experience had seemed safe and rather “nerdy” to her, lacking any substance of what she considered the sorcerous.

The hot air whorled about her and whispered at her eyes. Those eyes scanned along the space of what must be the nave of the church, although there were no pews; they considered the walls, which had slender carved openings rather than windows. She continued to walk toward the raised platform of the altar, on which she could espy no objects of art, no statues. There was but an irregular rectangle of shimmering blackness fastened to chains that descended from rafter beams. Reaching the altar, April climbed its steps and stood directly before what looked like a portion of some stained glass window composed of shiny black material, although what its art attempted to convey was beyond conjecture. The window’s suggestion of imagery seemed to convey a dark space with spirals of curious luminosity scattered about in its void of umbra. She had never seen blackness that looked so thick, so palpable. A wave of disordered energy issued from the surface of glass. Lines, like minutia of lightning, violated her eyes, and her mouth began to burn, so that she ran her tongue over her lips and then blew a gust of breath at the window. The place where her hot exhalation touched the glass formed a circle of bright yellow coloring which glowed momentarily and then disappeared; and as it vanished so too did her eyesight, as something benumbed her brain. She was barely aware of falling onto the altar floor.

Soft lips pressed against her ear and breathed uncanny language into her, articulation that was thick and cold as it crawled into her mind. It was unlike any tongue with which she was acquainted, seeming almost more like clumsy mumbling than actual idiom; but it had its effect, it cleared her mind and soothed her itching eyes. Cyrus knelt beside her and helped April to a sitting position. He brushed his fingers through her hair and touched a bump that bled on her head. “That was clumsy,” he said.

She laughed, then moaned at piercing pain. “God, that was weird. Is it bleeding? Here, I have a clean handkerchief in my pocket.”

“Try to stand,” the boy told her as he helped her to her feet. Together they went to a low stand on which she saw a basin of dark water. Cyrus took her black handkerchief and soaked it in the basin, and then he brought it to her head and bathed her wound. He gazed at her with his queer silver eyes. “Did you touch it, or speak to it? The black window?”

His naming of it brought a sudden chill to her flesh. “No, of course not. What on earth would I speak to it, Cyrus?” However, she could not help but turn her head to gaze again at the thing that hung above the altar. “What the hell is this place? It looks so ancient.”

“It’s where Simon Gregory Williams keeps his special collection of art. The church is modeled on one that he saw in Europe. The stones and bricks with which he had it built were brought over from Ireland and Wales, and they are ancient indeed. Here, hold this to your head. Does it hurt?”

“Yes. Must have been an effect of this insufferable air, this heat. Made me dizzy. Let’s get out of here.” Without waiting for his reply, she hurried to an arched threshold and escaped the dark place, rushing off the mound of mist and happy to feel mild sunlight on her eyes. She turned and watched Cyrus slowly emerge from the church. “What was that you were saying when I was on the floor?”

“Hmm?”

“What was it you were whispering to me, those weird words?”

He furrowed his brow. “I whispered nothing.”

She shook her head, annoyed. “Damn, this place is strange.” She looked around, disconcerted. “Which way is it to the bookshop?”

“We’ll go there together.” He walked away from her, toward the woods. It was not the way she had come, she was certain, and yet she followed him as she gazed at the very white sky above them, at the sphere of pale fire that was the sun. The aether had lost some of its cloying sweetness but had retained its unseasonable heat, and she was glad to step into the darkness of the trees as she followed the silent boy. She watched him as they walked and felt again his aura of strangeness. Cyrus moved with animal grace through the woodland, which grew darker as they moved deeper into it. She noticed the way he reached out to trees and soothed their texture with his hands, as one would touch a beloved friend. And then she caught her breath as he led her to a circle of tall standing stones that tilted toward each other beneath dark tree limbs.

“This isn’t the way to Webster’s,” she accused him.

“No. But it’s interesting, isn’t it? Come on, I thought you’d enjoy seeing it, with your background.”

“What background is that, Cyrus?”

He smiled cryptically and stepped between the stones, which he touched with hands and forehead. April stepped to them and studied the designs that had been chiseled on them, which reminded her slightly of the “manitou” stones she had seen in her home state. Cyrus, tracing symbols on one pillar with his finger, began to whistle, a high-pitched sound that April did not enjoy. It was odd, because the sound seemed to sail away from his pursed lips and rise above them, into the verdant darkness above. His face looked queer in the shaded place, especially the silver eyes, which seemed almost to shimmer with an inner illumination. She stepped nearer to him as his song softened, and she caught hold of his hand that traced the tribal glyph upon the stone. Uncannily, he smiled at her, twisted his lips into a new shape and whistled in a different way. The hand she held lifted from the stone and moved to her breastbone; she shuddered as she felt it move further upward, to her face, seeming still to trace an occult symbol on her skin. She stopped the movement of his hand and lifted it to her face, and her nostrils drank in its sweet fragrance, which was the perfume she had detected earlier in the air. His flesh was very soft as she moved his hand to her mouth and touched it with her tongue. Lowly, he laughed and led her from the place, through the woodland, until they stood on the hill on which Adam Webster’s bookshop was situated.

V

She lay in bed, the windows to her room open, and watched the burning candle that she had placed on a window sill. The patch of sky outside her window was black and void of starlight. The tiny flame of the candle did not move, for there was no breeze, and as she gazed at it her eyes grew heavy. She did not understand the sound that seemed to whisper outside her window, the language that had been uttered to her in the church and that she could not understand or clearly recall. Oddly, the spectral language seemed more familiar now, as she balanced on the rim between wakefulness and dreaming. April fell into a deep sleep as she whispered to herself, and thus she did not witness the sky outside her window as it began

to alter subtly, to contain the image that she had examined on the pane of glass that hung within the church. Nor did she hear the things that began to moan atop the twin-peaked mountain, or the understated pounding that emerged from some place beneath the valley earth. Perhaps she dreamed of these matters as she spoke in sleep; perhaps she envisioned the place deep within the Sesquan woods where the mauve mist rose eerily and revealed a second alternative woodland, where a tunnel formed by dark twisted trees was trod upon by smooth black feet. Perhaps she saw the one who stood at the threshold where the two forests met and momentarily combined, the one whose face of mockery was illuminated by the phosphorescent moss that clung to the trunks of trees and was the only feeble light. Then the forest with those mossy trees melted away, and the black man stood on Sesqua's sod, that dirt which shuddered at the touch of the strange one's daemonic tread as he stalked through the woodland, toward the hill whereon the ancient church had been erected.

In his personal study beneath the room where April Dorgan slept, Adam Webster fondled runic bones in his hand, tossed them onto a table and frowned at the portent they conveyed. His large hand swept the bones to the floor and picked up the partial translation of the Dhol Chants that had been one of the books that had belonged to Laird Dorgan. He spoke one of the chants in his low voice, using the original Chinese inflections, and felt the psychic response that wove through the aether from the one who had entered the ancient church. In the room above him, the sleeping woman whispered a response to Adam's muttered phrase.

Cyrus crept beneath the alien starlight. The sky had never looked as it did this night, so similar to the plate of window pane that had been taken from a haunted church in Providence, Rhode Island, just before that building had been razed. Darkness whirled within darkness, and light danced within lines of light. As he gazed into the sky, Cyrus felt as never before that he was a creature of the valley and its elements, rooted to this planet and its particular chemistry of earth and air. That air was now tainted by the presence that had invaded it, but the sacred sod was pure. Cyrus fell to his knees and clawed into the earth, picked up handfuls of dirt and rubbed the substance into his face. He listened to the ground and sensed the subdued pulsation of that which served as the valley's heart. And then he rose and walked toward the raised ground on which Simon Gregory

Williams had had his cathedral of arcane art erected; he climbed up the earthen steps that took him up the incline, to the black ancient pile that was eerily shadowed in encroaching moonlight. Cyrus approached the arched threshold through which he could see the deep purple light that filled the church, the light that emanated from the tall and lean figure that stood upon the altar with one dark hand against the square of black glass that had once been a portion of a great apsidal window in a spectral church in New England.

The child of Sesqua Valley stepped into the haunted realm and saw the shapeless forms that huddled here and there burning low mounds of incense. He walked through the purple radiance to the raised platform of the altar. The Dark One did not look at him. “Ah, child of elemental shadow, what have you come to offer me?”

“I offer you nothing. I’m not some mortal with whom you can play. Why do you manifest yourself?”

“I have been summoned, Cyrus. I do not leave empty-handed. The Beast is not among you?”

“No, Simon’s in Prague.”

The Dark One uttered laughter, deeply toned and unearthly. “He amuses me. I am sorry to have missed him. Come to me, child of shadow.”

Cyrus shivered as he watched the hand move away from the pane of glass, the hand that was now offered to him; but he did not move. “I offer you no mortal veneration.”

At this the figure turned and stared at him with haughty eyes set in a proud and beautiful façade that reminded Cyrus of a painting of an archangel that Simon had shown him in Italy, the work of an unknown artist. The thing before him looked very young and self-assured. Its masculine attire was of black cloth that contained a deep red undertone of color. When it spoke, its mellow tones rippled through the air like liquid language. “Then I will snatch my due from some other source. But you are mistaken to think you have no mortal soul; for when your elemental stuff walks this plane in the guise of flesh and blood, you live within the law of earthly substance that is far removed from your realm of shadow and mist. That is the portion of you that I can claim at any time. Be cautious, Cyrus Lynchwood.” The Dark One moved down the platform and loomed before the lad. He offered the child his black hand once again. “While you walk

this valley, you are a beast indeed. Do as beasts of earth must, child. Give the veneration of thy tongue.”

The young Sesquan felt it then, a thing he had never known before: the velvet kiss of fear. He marveled at how his husk of mortal flesh trembled as he bent to the offered hand and smoothed his tongue along its alien texture.

VI

April awakened to a gentle rapping at her chamber door. She was surprised to see her call answered by Adam Webster carrying a large tray of what smelled like breakfast food and watched silently as he placed the tray on a table and then found a bed tray that he placed over her blanketed legs.

“There’s no clock in here,” she mumbled, looking around.

“It’s early afternoon. You’ve slept soundly, but I think you must be famished, you’ve not eaten much since your arrival. I’ve taken the liberty to prepare you a late breakfast. I suppose you’ll want to be heading back home today. Perhaps this amount will suffice for the box of books, and if you agree I have the funds in my study.”

She glanced at the figure that had been penned onto the slip of paper he placed before her. “That’s far more than I expected.”

He shrugged. “The books are choice indeed, and their condition is excellent. Simon will be happy to have them. When were you planning on leaving the valley?”

“I haven’t really thought about it. I’m enjoying being away from my little world in Wisconsin more than I thought I would. I’ve imposed on your generosity long enough, though, so I’ll find a room in town.”

“Nonsense, it’s pleasant to have some company. I thought, perhaps, you would enjoy accompanying me to a small gathering of poets tonight. I think the crowd may appeal to what I perceive to be your Bohemian identity.” He smiled, and although his face was so very odd, his smile seemed genuine enough, and she accepted his invitation. She ate and dressed, and then decided to go for another walk, and found herself strolling once again to the ancient church and its display of esoteric art. She thought,

perhaps, that she had dreamt of the place in the night, but the memory of those dreams was hazy and vague. She knew that at one point in her dream she had been gazing at the black window and been sucked into its subtly swirling vortex. The day was cooler and the sky overcast—rain was probably on its way, which she would welcome if it cooled the still-hot atmosphere of the valley. Although there was a fairly strong wind, its force did not dissipate the streams of vapor that rose from the small plateau on which the old church stood. April climbed the earthen steps that took her up that bit of raised land, to the ancient edifice, and she frowned in confusion, not understanding the movement of light that she watched as she peered into the rectangular opening.

She entered the dark and lonely place and could not comprehend what she was seeing. Some vague figure stood on the altar behind the pane of black glass, a man who held a globe of purple illumination in his hands. The black light that emanated from the globe shone through the window and spilled weird illumination to the ceiling, a pattern of strangely colored light that whirled and writhed above her. She had never seen such alien combinations of color, and as she gazed at them she experienced sharp pain inside her head. It was as though she were looking up at some unfathomable cosmic force, some spinning horde of stars, and out of the abysses between those stars swept chilly currents of pain that pierced her eyes and split her brain. This sharp cold pain crept from her head to all her flesh, which shivered as with ague. It was then that the figure behind the black window stepped forth, through the darkness and light, to her. She looked at the swarthy skin, the young and slightly sinister face. As she gazed into his eyes her sense of nervous anxiety increased, and she began to shake violently. And then the stranger's cool hands encased her arms, and she calmed. He stood before her, the dark man, like some weird sentient shadow, observing her face as if he knew her and was about to speak her name. She did not want this being to say her name. April opened her mouth and tried to speak, but found herself unable to utter sound. The globe of outré light that the fellow had held was gone, as were its effects above them. The dusky place was very still, very quiet, but there was a riot of whispering within her head. She shut her eyes as if by so doing she could shut off her fear. Shivering, she raised her hands so as to rub her arms, and in so doing realized that no one now held her, that she stood alone within

the nave. April opened her eyes and felt that she was dreaming, for the scene around her was one of distortion and ruin. The walls of the ancient church were cracked, with portions of the huge bricks missing. A horrid green hue spilled into the ruins, like the light of some diseased moon. The ground on which she stood had been disrupted, so that she stumbled over raised portions of the ground as she crept toward the arched threshold. The black window swung slowly on the chains that held it, its surface suffused with a kind of dark purple phosphorescence within which lines of light that resembled lightning occasionally flickered. Although she could not detect the figure she had imagined, she seemed to feel its presence all around her, a sensation that so disturbed her that she fled from the building, into dark air. The storm had not yet erupted, but the sky above her was black with seething clouds of tempest.

April turned again to gaze at the ancient church and saw no signs of the violent destruction that she had imagined inside, but the figure of the strange totem caught her attention. Something about the thing made her think of Grandfather and the stories he told her, late in life, about his experience at Rick's Lake. She could not quite remember, but the more she studied the queer totem the more the diseased aura of the place got to her, and thus she turned and rushed down the grassy slope to the road that led back to town. The sight of the Webster habitation actually gave her a feeling of relief. Webster himself was at his desk inside the shop, and he looked at her inquisitively as she stopped at the entrance to the shop as though she might speak to him; but then she pushed away from the door and found her way up the stairs and to her quiet room. She had left one of the room's small windows open, and cold air now gushed into the chamber, chilling her. She closed the window as rain finally began to fall, the sound of which seemed to calm her. That she had need of calming perplexed her—she could not understand what she had experienced in the church, or the emotional aftermath of that occurrence. Something had touched her mind, some troubling thing that had traumatized her imagination.

The world outside her windows darkened, and suddenly April did not want to be alone. She changed into a dress and applied a modicum of make-up, and then went down the stairs to the main room of Webster's bookshop, where Adam still sat at his desk, looking over some old books. "Are we still on for tonight?"

“Yes. This is actually a good time to leave. It’s a small club where the artistic souls of the valley convene.”

“Great. We can take my car, unless you want to drive.”

“I do not drive, Miss Dorgan.”

They exited the building and stepped into a light rainfall that felt, to her, refreshing. The stifling heat that had plagued the valley had dissipated, and the sweetness that April had originally detected in the air had returned. The odd man who sat beside her in the car remained silent, except to give some few directions, but her initial wariness of the fellow had eased; he was an isolated creature in a ridiculously small town and was probably not used to nor comfortable with a sudden intrusion such as she had thrown upon him. They entered the main part of what she guessed would have been their downtown section and parked in front of the place that he indicated. The antiquated buildings had been built close together and seemed like structures that had been raised many decades earlier, and the wooden sidewalks made her feel as though she had escaped into some pocket of old time. He vacated the car and then waited for her at the door of the club or whatever it was, and she nodded pleasantly at him as she walked past him into the establishment, which proved to look like so many other clubs she had known, with low lighting and many tables at which people whispered to each other over drinks. At one place in the club there was a small platform that served as performance stage, and looking at it gave her a momentary chill, for it reminded her of the altar in the sinister church; and with good reason, for a dark figure stood upon it, at whom many of the club’s denizens gazed with troubled faces. The tall lean man stood very still, with one hand on top of the head of the boy who sat crossed-legged before him. Cyrus did not look into the crowd as he raised a flute to his mouth, and the music that issued from that instrument was disquieting. It puzzled April how such a deep-toned sound could flow from so slim a piece of wood, a sound that reminded her of echoed tempest heard within the eaves of some vast roof.

The black man smiled as he peered into the crowd. Although his flesh was black as pitch, his features were not Negroid but reminded the woman of a replica she had once seen of an Egyptian Sphinx. She had read once that the Greek word had perhaps derived from the Egyptian “Shesepankh” and meant something like “living statue.” The man who gazed at them from the stage could easily have been such an entity, for there was something

about his smooth and youthful features that looked mask-like and ersatz, a sly mockery of mortality. The chiseled mouth opened as the black man began to sing.

“Gonna blow the dust of earth,
Until it is dispersed.
Blow that dust of earth.
Gonna blow the glorious sun,
Until that globe is gone.
Blow the glorious sun.
Gonna blow your mortal mind,
Then leave you far behind,
Deaf and dumb and blind.”

April found the fellow’s mellow voice troubling—it didn’t sound quite real, having a quality that sounded almost like a recording. She did not like the way the man’s black hand moved through Cyrus’s hair, like some predatory thing, and she watched as Adam rose from his chair and went to the stage and removed the hand from the boy’s head. She thought she heard Adam mutter something like “You cannot claim him” to the black man and the lad was pulled from the stage and joined them at their table as Adam stepped to the bar and ordered drinks. The young man’s silver eyes wore an unfathomable expression as they watched the black man float from the stage and stalk toward them. The fellow stopped momentarily at their table and smiled down at her.

“I am Khem. Delighted to meet you, Miss Dorgan. I was acquainted with your grandsire.” So saying, he held to her his ebony hand, which she clasped. The man’s skin was soft like silk. April watched as he turned her hand over and peered at her palm, then bent so as to kiss the flesh thereof. She shuddered at the press of his tongue. Releasing her, the dark man bowed to Adam and vacated the club. Once the fellow was gone, April realized that she had been holding her breath.

“That was weird,” she said, blowing air out of her lungs. “He couldn’t have known Grandfather, he’s way too young. Who the hell is he?”

“No one of importance, Miss Dorgan.” The drinks arrived and April sipped at hers without examining its contents. The potion was sweet and smooth as it slipped down her throat.

“Call me April, Adam.” She looked around the room and laughed. “This is the most uptight horde of ‘Bohemians’ I’ve ever encountered. Why is everyone staring at us? God, this town is freakish.” She looked at her hand, to the place that Khem had kissed. Cyrus leaned to her and studied her palm. “His were the softest lips I’ve even encountered. Did you smell his breath? It reminded me of the cassia Grandfather used when making his special brand of pudding.” She looked around the room again. “Isn’t anyone else going to recite?”

“This is mostly a social establishment, Miss—April. I fear our avant-garde must seem rather tame to what you are used to.”

The woman chuckled. “Oh, I’m from a small town, too, you know. We never get quite as wild as they do in big cities. We have a coven, and experiment with sexuality and narcotics. But I have always been a book person, and for me the Bohemian movement, if we call it that, is rooted to literature and art. Trilby is a book that I adore.” She snapped her fingers. “That’s what that guy reminds me of.” She turned to Cyrus. “The effect he seemed to have on you was rather ‘Svengali.’ Who the hell is he?” She noticed the quick look exchanged by the two males.

“You visited Simon’s Cathedral of Art, I hear,” Adam replied. “A fascinating collection.”

This reminded April of something that had been on her mind. “Adam, you said you visited my grandfather with this Simon fellow. Were you here when my grandfather visited Sesqua Valley?”

“Probably, but if so the visit made no impression. Why?”

“Remember when you showed me that entry in Grandfather’s journal about the strange totem? There’s one just in front of the church that resembles the thing Grandfather described. I seem to recall Grandfather being upset that the totem had gone missing from the region. Wouldn’t it be wild if the thing found its way to Sesqua Valley?” She tried to sound innocent and playful so as to conceal her troubled mind and growing sense of unease.

“That would be amusing. I cannot now recall the thing, we have so many such totems and figures that have been created by our artistic denizens and planted in many places of the woodland. Some of them are quite fanciful. Will you have another drink, April?”

“No more whiskey for me, thanks. It was whiskey, wasn’t it? But with something added to it? It packs a punch, I must say.” She laughed at herself and made a silly face. “I think a walk back to the bookstore will sober me up a bit. I haven’t walked so much in ages. I really like it. I feel so far away from everything here. It’s okay for me to leave my car parked there until the morning?”

Cyrus rose. “Yes, that’s fine. Come on, I’ll walk you home. The rain has stopped, I think.”

April stood and felt a moment’s dizziness. She had rarely been drunk, but whatever it was she had imbibed had had an effect. Her head was hot and her eyesight slightly out of focus as she touched the wound that had resulted from her fall in the church. She laughed at herself and then turned to smile at the others in the crowded room, all of whom were watching her. “Good night, my fellows,” she told them, holding up her empty glass and putting it to her mouth one last time. Cyrus took the glass from her and set it back on the table, and then he escorted her out of the building. The air had been freshened by the rain, which had now completely ceased. April peered into the sky and felt another wave of vertigo—for in the dark sky above them she thought she could detect spirals of illumination that reminded her of the designs on the black window. But then the image melted and she could see starlight only.

“How old are you, Cyrus?” she asked as they walked along the wooden sidewalk.

“How old do you think I am?”

“Hmm, seventeen or eighteen?” He smiled at her but did not answer. “You ever been in the big city?”

“I’ve visited many cities, with Simon. It was interesting, but there’s no place like home.”

“I don’t feel that, now. I like it here. It feels authentically different. I can’t quite explain it. The crowd I hang out with at home—they try so hard to be radical, but they’re all so very normal and bland. Their radical natures are things they’ve learned from the lives of others, which they try to duplicate; but they aren’t authentic, it’s all just cliché. Now, that crowd back there, they were different. I sensed something that I can’t pinpoint. You have it, too, some kind of secretive nature. Something alien. It’s there in

your eyes.” She stopped and placed a hand against his face, which he took, kissing her palm.

“You’re really drunk. Adam must have given you the good stuff.”

“Why is he so uptight?”

“You’re an outsider, but one with whom the valley has some psychic ties. Probably has something to do with your grandfather and Simon and those books, and that place you come from, Rick’s Lake. We don’t get many visitors here. It takes a special soul to find Sesqua Valley. Just the fact that you’re here indicates a lot.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Yes you do. You’re not here by accident. You’re here with a purpose. You’re a very bad actress, I must say. Adam’s uptight because he hasn’t yet figured out your agenda. What he doesn’t realize is that you don’t understand it yourself. You came looking for answers, or maybe you came to give substance to questions and confusions. You’ve been touched by Sesqua Valley, and you’ll never be as you were.”

“You’re a spooky boy,” she laughed. “I’ve been ‘claimed,’ you mean? Like you?”

“What?”

“I heard what Adam told that Khem fellow when he went to get you from the stage. What is your relationship with the black man?”

He linked arms with her and led her onto the dirt road. “My only relationship is with this valley, Miss Dorgan. Nothing else can ‘claim’ me.” It was strange, the sensation that suddenly overwhelmed her, of wanting to protect the lad. She put her arms around his waist as they walked toward dark woodland.

* * *

Adam Webster ran his hand over the stone from which the macabre totem had been composed and fingered the symbols that had been etched onto its surface. He whispered the language of those symbols and felt them bend the gentle wind that pushed to him from the woods. The ground on which he stood shook lightly as the white mountain shifted its twin peaks, and Adam moaned at the wailing that sailed from those peaks, ululations of the beasts that dreamt within the mountain’s sequestered places. He felt

absolutely his separation from the mundane world of humanity and sensed that his time of mortality was coming to a close—the realm of mist and shadow that was his demesne was calling him home. Would he rebel and resist that call, as Simon Gregory Williams had done for more than a century? Perhaps. He understood more clearly Simon’s refusal to melt away from the mortal world and the confines of Sesqua Valley—the keen desire to protect the valley from that which would harm and corrupt it. Such as the thing that stood behind him now. Adam leaned away from the totem so as to peer at its topmost image—the image of the Faceless God.

“Why does your kind always try to refute me?”

“Who among us has tried? Simon idolizes you, as this edifice testifies. But your concerns are not things that matter to us.”

“Of what do you refer?”

“Humanity, and their fate. We are indifferent about such things.”

“You cannot begin to comprehend cosmic impassivity. You are so much a part of this little terrestrial sphere. The mist and murk of which you are a spawn is earthly product of a supernatural kind—yet of this planet nonetheless. Your nature is rooted to this valley, of which you have always been and will always be a part, for as long as this valley exists.”

“Our realm is beyond the world, like unto the Dreamworlds, that exist in other dimensions of time and space. I suppose that’s why you come to us so often, because of the place where the woodland of dreams touches our own. Simon taught me of it, from the elder lore. He’s taught me many things concerning thee and thine.”

The black man knelt to the ground and dug with hands into the earth. As Adam finally turned to face the Outer One, he saw that the dirt and grass and sand that had been gathered were being shaped into a ball of debris. Adam shivered as the Dark One blew onto that globe and gave it a semblance of sentience. He watched as the hands moved away from the sphere, which was now green and blue with life as it floated in the air just at the Dark One’s chest. “What do you think will happen to your realm of mist and shadow once this world is destroyed and discarded? What will become of it when I breathe its dust away?” At this the daemon pursed his perfect lips and exhaled. A black cloud sailed from his mouth and enveloped the small sphere, which became a thing of particles. And then, chortling at what he chanced to mould in play, the daemon blew the globe of dust away.

Adam looked overhead at the sky, which became darkened and bereft of all illumination. He saw the blackness filter toward the mountain and tarnish its white stone so that it became an obsidian obelisk. The illusion lasted but one moment until the sky and valley assumed their normal semblance.

“Why are you here?”

The Dark One smiled. “I was summoned.”

“Then take her and be gone.”

“In time, child of shadow.” Adam did not watch as the daemon floated past him, into the ancient church. Calmly, he knelt to where the valley had been clawed into. He placed his hands over the place and whispered words, smoothing the sod until its surface was smooth and whole. He could smell the electric charge that filtered from within the building, but he ignored it and walked the earth toward his bookshop.

VII

April found that she was too awake to try to sleep after Cyrus had taken her home, and so she took herself to the main room in the bookshop and found a section of poetry. She sat on the floor and reached for a volume on the bottom shelf, a book that appealed to her because it had been bound in black leather, the scent of which she adored. Bringing the book to her nostrils, she drank in the aroma of aged leather and yellowing pages. The title, in gilt lettering, was *The Hermaphrodite and Other Poems*. She scanned the brittle pages until coming to a poem concerning Wilde, one of her literary idols. She spoke the poem’s concluding lines aloud:

“There, in the pagan darkness, he

Felt his own radiant agony,

And heard the gods affirm;

‘That which thou soughtest shalt thou find:

Beauty, a breath of wandering wind,

Dust, and the drowsy worm.’”

A shadow of someone standing behind her formed on the wall of books. “What is it you’re reading, Miss April?”

She shivered at the words, and at a memory they stirred. “Um, a wonderful book of poetry.” She stood and faced Adam. “May I purchase it? It’s quite my thing.”

“Let me give it to you as a gift,” the weird fellow answered, his curious mouth forming its strange smile. “Did you have a pleasant walk home with Cyrus?”

“Oh, yes. I quite like him. And the air is so much cooler now.”

“Yes, the valley has claimed its climate once again.”

“Yes. Well, thank you so much for the book. I’ll just go to my room and dip into it. Goodnight, Adam.”

Adam bowed to her, followed her to the hallway and watched her climb the stairs. When she reached the landing, April turned to smile at him; and as she looked at him, standing in the dusky hallway with his silver eyes shimmering within his wolfish face, she sensed that he was not human; but what that meant she could not comprehend. Perhaps she was still intoxicated and her brain was playing tricks, as the light and shadow played on Adam’s bestial façade, teasing her imagination. She entered her room and looked around at the beautiful antiques, the comfortable bed, the soft light and cozy shadows, and she liked it more than ever. The place was beginning to feel so homey and familiar, and she fantasized about never leaving this place for what she realized was her very dull, safe life back in Wisconsin. Sitting on the bed, she opened the book of poetry and read the title poem, stopping when she came to a line about the “unfathomable” Hermaphrodite—and that word hit her with full force; for she had entered an unfathomable realm, something unlike anything she had heretofore experienced—and she was becoming utterly beguiled. Sesqua Valley appealed to her adventurous soul, which had tried to find itself in Bohemian culture. April treasured what she considered “true” Bohemianism, an authentic radicalness; yet she had never truly found it in her small hometown, except for the final two years of her grandfather’s life, when she had often slept in his small extra bedroom and spent many haunted evenings listening to his trembling voice recite the history of the incident at Rick’s Lake and its aftermath. Here, in this uncanny valley town, she had discovered a world unlike any she had known, with creatures that were unworldly. Yes, she was intoxicated, by the valley and her growing sense of it, the wonder and disquiet it inspired.

April heard the sound of wind in the distant woodland, and she walked to the small-paned window and opened it so as to smell the storm; but the nighted valley was still, the remote trees unmoving. And yet she heard the sound of rising wind within the woodland, a sound that called to her and beckoned. She left her room and walked down the stairs, to where the lights had been extinguished. The air was cool as she stepped outside, and although there was no moon she could see swarms of stars in the sky. From beneath her feet she sensed a slight pounding, a rhythm that matched her heartbeat. She moved along the area of grass behind the house that led to the trees, and she stood amazed at the sound that came from within the dense growth of forest; for she could hear it now unmistakably, a rushing tempest from some hidden place within the woods, an alarming sound that chilled her soul; and beneath the song of tempest she could hear a word uttered by some unearthly tongue: “Ygnaiih! Ygnaiih!” It was an utterance that iced her blood, for this was a word that her grandfather had shouted during his worst nightmares. April placed one foot into the forest, and all was suddenly stilled. She did not seem to notice how the stars formed curiously above her, creating symbols in the sky. She listened for any sound, and when at last she heard it, she began to quake emotionally. What she heard was the frail calling of her name, in her grandfather’s voice. There was no urgency in the sound—it was calm and caring, and coaxing. It summoned, and she followed, into the woodland, along the rough path toward the dweller in darkness, the shadow thing that writhed and howled, although how it could do so was unfathomable since it wore no face. It was tall and lean, with two long extensions that might have been flailing arms, similar to those on the totem that leaned against the ancient church. Two black forms boiled on the ground before it, small shapeless things that held ivory flutes that pierced amorphous mouths. Daemoniac music echoed and reechoed in the enclosing forest as the dark thing surged with shaping and raised its facelessness to the stars that circled above the trees forming trails of illumination similar to the patterns she had seen on the black window that hung inside Simon Gregory Williams’ edifice of art. Her eyes felt very odd as they watched the moving stars and reflected their alchemy. God, her eyes felt as if they were being pulled from their sockets, toward the sky. She cried out as something took hold of her hand. Another hand, soft and trembling, momentarily sheltered her eyes, and then a mouth was pressed

against her ear. “Run,” Cyrus urged her, “run with me!”

VIII

When she opened her eyes, April saw Adam sitting next to her as she lay in bed. He moved to help her to a sitting position, and then he reached for a tea cup that sat on a bedside stand. “Wait a minute,” she told him. “The last time you offered me a drink I came to regret it. Damn, what was in that hooch you gave me in the club? I’ve never hallucinated like that before. I can’t tell what was memory and what was dream.”

“Drink this. It will soothe your brain. Perhaps I should have used precaution in offering you our special valley poteen. As you said, it packs a punch. This will have an opposite effect.” She took the cup and sniffed at its herbal contents, and then she sipped the hot liquid, which was sweet and smooth. She drank some more and leaned her head back onto the pillow.

“How many bookshops are in this town?”

“This one only. Although Leonidas sells some few rare tomes in his museum.”

“So you wouldn’t feel threatened if someone opened another shop in town?”

“Ah, you have been charmed by Sesqua Valley. But can you leave your lifelong home and settle here?”

She blew air out of her mouth and frowned. “It hasn’t been the same since Grandfather’s death. It’s weird, but those last two years with him had a real effect. He spoke of so many strange things, and so effectively that I could feel them in my mind. We sometimes discussed those books that I have brought you, and he knew their contents intimately. I couldn’t read them, of course, not knowing anything but English. But listening to him talk about them and their legends was like being a child who listened to fairy tales told by some enchanting adult—told with such passion and—longing—that I entered into the imaginary world completely, especially in dream. I haven’t had those dreams since Grandfather’s death, but I seem to be having them again, since coming here. They are disturbing yet beguiling,

and they remind me of Grandfather. I feel him, somehow, here, or some kind of influence spawned by the things he whispered to me near his end of life. It's difficult to express because it sounds so damn—supernatural. I've been enchanted, yes. You wouldn't feel that I was crowding in on your business?"

He removed the cup from her hands and took them in his own. "Come with me. Come." Adam pulled her out of bed and led her down the carpeted stairs to the large and crowded room of books, then to a set of two wooden panels set into one wall. She listened to the sound of wood moving against wood as he slid the paneled door away from the other, to its place within the wall, then followed him into another spacious room that contained some few pieces of furniture and nothing else.

"Now, if I remember it correctly, your Grandfather's bookstore was a small affair, and its contents could quite easily fit into this space, unless you've expanded."

"No, I haven't. Oh, I love how old everything smells in here. Isn't it delicious? Do you really suggest that we combine our shops? But where would I live? I got rid of most of my furniture when I moved into the bookstore, I like living with Grandfather's few things."

"There's a second room upstairs that would serve admirably as living quarters, and you can keep the small room as boudoir. It would be pleasant to have another bookish soul living here. If you are certain you want to dwell within the valley."

"I feel quite certain, which is weird because I'm not usually so compulsive. Perhaps coming here and dwelling on alternative possibilities has shown me how boring my life has been. Yes, I am quite certain. It's early, isn't it? I should probably start for Wisconsin today. I'm impatient to set everything in motion. I'll walk to town and fetch my car. Thank you, Adam."

He escorted her from the room and watched her rush upstairs to fetch some items and then run down them again and out of the house. When he went again into the dark vacant room he found Cyrus seated in one of the overstuffed chairs. "You reek of star-stuff," Adam said, scowling. "Did you gaze upon him?"

"I tried not to."

“Pah! You are not very wise for a child of valley shadow. Simon has lectured you on looking upon the Crawling Chaos in any of its daemonic manifestations. It’s alluring enough when it apes human form, but...” He stopped and knelt next to the boy. “Let me see your eyes, Cyrus. Yes, they are tainted with particles of darkness and nightmare. What have you been doing?”

“I’ve been studying the window from the Providence church, the window that was composed of satanic sand and situated by a cult into a New England church.” He peered at Adam’s worried face and began to laugh. “I can understand why even our great beast, Simon Gregory Williams, venerates Nyarlathotep. He—it—is awesome. Simon told me once that there is a place in the woods where our realm touches and combines with the realm of dream. Adam, do you dream? Because I never have. When I sleep it’s like my essence returns in some way to the realm of mist and shadow of which we are a part, the place that Simon has led us from so that we can entertain a season of mortality in this physical semblance. Simon says that there are many dreamworlds, not all composed of human slumber. Do you dream, Adam?”

“It is not our nature to do so, Cyrus. ‘We are such stuff as dreams are made on.’”

“Simon dreams.”

“Because he is decayed from spending over a century in this mortal existence.”

“But it was Simon who discovered the way to bring us here, for a season. It was Simon who sensed those human souls who entered the valley and thought to claim it, despite the warnings of the aboriginal tribes who knew to shun this valley and its sprites. Maybe it can be Simon who could teach me to find the place where the forests meet and conjoin, so that I can taste the realm of dream.”

“You talk dangerous nonsense. You’ve been infected.”

“By the Dark One? Yes, he has touched my eyes. I did look upon him in his daemonic form, and it was riveting. He’s come for her, hasn’t he?”

“She is linked to him through her grandfather, who became tainted in a place called Rick’s Lake. Her coming here was no accident, nor her summoning of the haunter of the dark. Her fate is sealed, and he will have her.”

“And take her where? Where does he dwell?”

“In any place he likes, in all of Time and Space, in the dimensions between the stars.” He saw the way the boy’s eyes shimmered. “But we won’t dwell on such things. We abide, Cyrus, and then we enjoy this taste of mortality, for a little while.”

* * *

April pulled away from the center of town and found herself driving toward the spot where the ancient church had been erected by Simon Williams so as to house his relics in honor of Nyarlathotep. Parking, she gazed at the stone structure, at the spirals of mist that rose from the ground on which it had been constructed from imported stones. She saw the totem that had figured in her delirium, the thing she was now certain had been imported from its place near the lodge at Rick’s Lake. How peculiar it was, to seem like some part of a puzzle that was slowly, inexorably, being fitted together. The ground was rocky where she had parked, and she took her time after getting out of the car and stepping to the place where the yellow grass began to grow. She walked past the various stone figures that tilted on that grass and then up the incline to the church, stopping before the totem and touching its cool smoothness with her hot human hand. She could feel the wave of heat that pushed at her from the arched threshold, through which she finally passed.

He stood before the black window, one hand touching its surface. She did not hesitate but walked to and up the altar, stopping very near to him. “How did you know my grandfather?”

“Are you musical, Miss Dorgan?” He raised his other hand, in which he held an exquisite thing that had been created out of what looked like white gold. She had never seen anything more beautiful. He offered it to her. The flute was chilly to the touch. Bringing it to her face, she smoothed its texture against her skin, and then she placed it at her mouth. No music sounded.

“I can’t seem to play it.”

“So I see. Pity, you have such a tender soul. What a treasure you would have been, numbered with me and mine. What do you see when you look upon this surface?”

April gazed at the blackness of the hanging window, at the thick opacity within which were whorls of electric life. “I see a haunted heaven—and beyond.”

“You see the Audient Void, a place that waits and listens, that hungers. It has touched you as it touched your grandsire, and it will taint your dreams for all your mortal days. It could have been yours, intimately—but you are not the one. You don’t pine for it. Sweet dreams, Miss Dorgan.”

She felt herself float toward the ground, her mind spinning like the shapes on the black window. She dreamed of nameless things, and in those dreams her grandfather called her name. And then another called her name as hands shook her roughly.

“Where is he?” Adam shouted at her.

Groggily, she pushed herself up to a sitting position. “He was here.”

“Where is Cyrus?”

Before she could answer the ground beneath them began to pound, as if some preternatural heart pulsed in some deep place of the earth. From atop the twin-peaked mountain, things wailed to starlight. Cursing, Adam rushed from her, out of the edifice and into night, where he growled at the stars that moved above him and formed sigils in the sky. As April staggered from the church she saw those stars die out one by one as some thick gloom engulfed the heavens. Something in Adam’s agonized shrieking tormented her, and she rushed after him as he ran into the woodland. She found him kneeling in one spot, clawing into the earth and yowling at the figure who stood, tall and erect and supernal, some little ways away. The Dark One, wrapped in fabrics red as sunset flame, wore his triple crown of white gold. His unholy hands caressed the head of the one who slumped at his feet, the figure that was sheathed in living shadow that seemed to feast upon the mortal tissue of temporary flesh. April watched as that flesh bubbled and reshaped itself. She saw the young face in the head that finally raised its eyes to look at them—its silver eyes.

“You cannot claim him!” Adam screamed. “He is spawn of shadow, and to shadow he will return.” The strange dark one smiled at them, mockingly. He brought forward his other hand, in which he held a flute composed of the same stuff with which his diadem had been fashioned. The wretched thing at his feet took hold of the flute with shifting hands and brought it to his amorphous mouth. Eldritch music haunted the valley

woodland, accompanied by Adam's wails of outrage as he rose and tried to rush forward. The Dark One held up a hand, and April felt the invisible force that plummeted Adam, and crippled him. She saw the whorls of spinning illumination that formed above the daemon and then shot to Adam's face, and she smelled the rank aroma of Adam's percolating eyes. She crawled to him and took him in her arms as the child that had been claimed by Crawling Chaos continued to play his summoning, and she saw the wondrous realm that he brought forth with enchanted music, the forest of dreamland that crept toward the child and his new Master, claiming them. She wept as she watched the dreamland forest melt from view, as the blind thing in her embrace howled idiotically to heaven.

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